
MARIO ODYSSEY HANDS-ON VERDICT
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As you flick through the pages of **games™** this issue you will hopefully notice one or two changes. This issue we're introducing a new section to the magazine called Access. Put very simply, it's a place for everything that's exciting and interesting in gaming right now.

This is a project we've been thinking about for the last couple of years as the way in which we interact and talk about gaming has been evolving. Excitement and intrigue around a game now lives on much longer than its launch weekend. DLC and expansions are sometimes bigger than some full-priced releases. Access will open up how we approach new games as well as allowing us some room to check in with current titles to see how they're doing and why you should still be paying attention.

Additionally, games alone are not the only things that make this industry engaging, so we wanted to adjust our preview approach to include hardware, new technology, eSports events, trending community commentary and much more. We will also be looking to open up our pages a little to show off some of the incredible 4K assets and artwork we get our hands on, so you can appreciate them on a much larger scale.

So welcome to a new-look **games™** with a renewed commitment to bringing you the hottest new gaming info, regardless of where it's coming from in this diverse and evolving industry. We hope you enjoy it.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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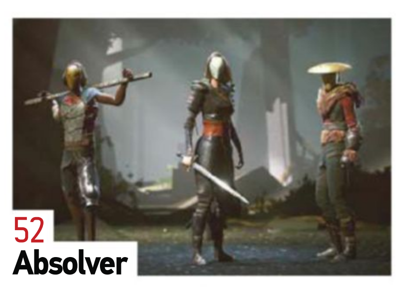
ACCESS





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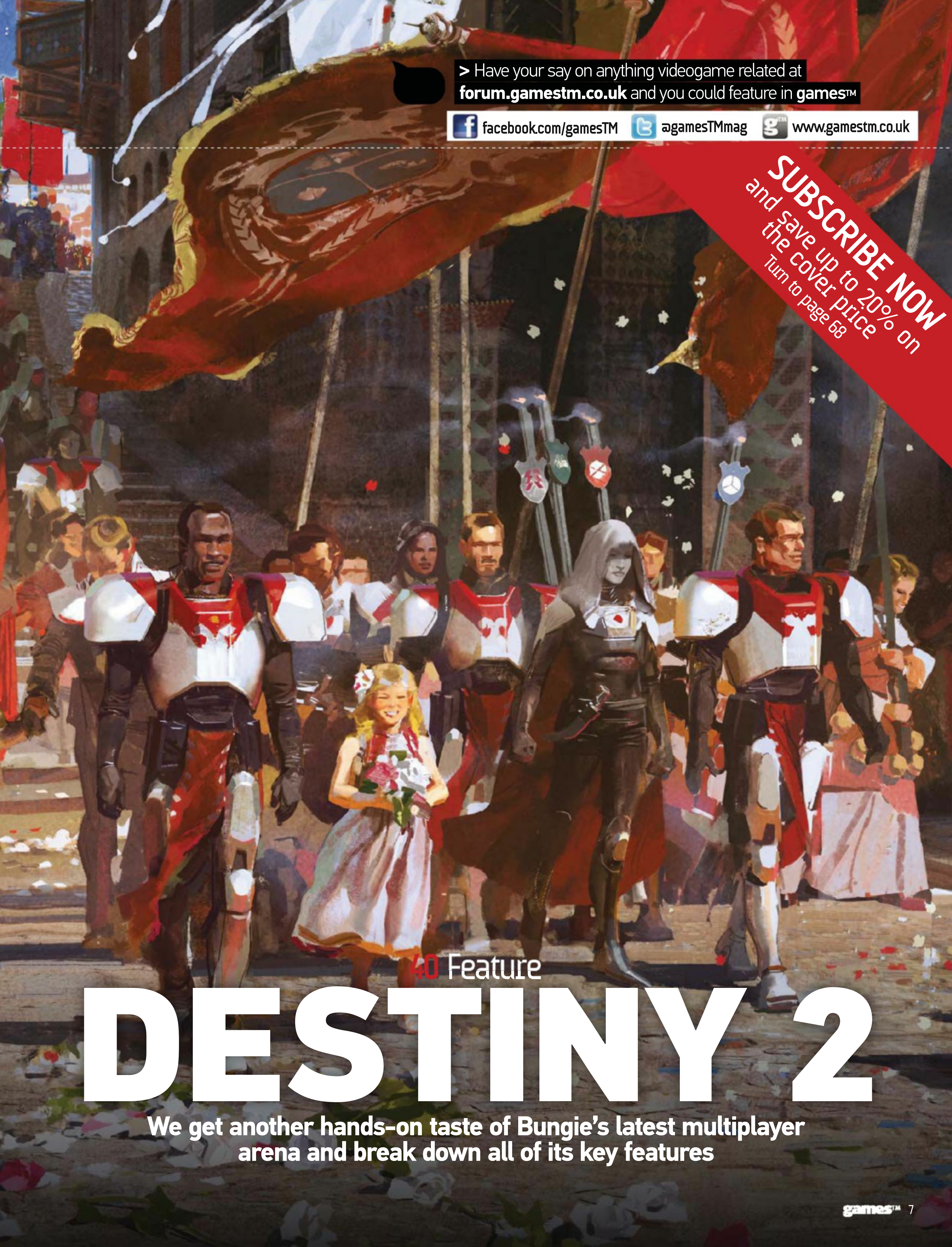
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RETRO



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SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

→ NINTENDO'S BEST PLAYGROUND TO DATE IS A FINE HOLIDAY DESTINATION

FORMAT: **SWITCH** | PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** | DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EPD** | RELEASE: **27 OCTOBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

Mario is over it. He's leaving the drama of the Mushroom Kingdom behind, heading out on his first real vacation in 15 years. He's taking time away from his varying – profoundly tiring – professions in an attempt to get back to basics: to tour six of the weirdest and most wonderful Kingdoms his world has been hiding away. It's a trip that will all but dwarf his adventures on the tropical Isle Delfino in size, scope, and enjoyment – for *Odyssey* is an experience with far more to offer than playing janitor in *Sunshine*. But of course, wherever Mario goes, trouble has a habit of following soon after.

While *Super Mario Odyssey* may broadly revolve around Mario trying his damndest to stop a royal wedding – stealing anything even remotely associated with the ceremony, from the flower arrangements to the wedding ring – the real fun is to be found on the fringes of this event. Shirk your responsibilities and explore the wilds, collecting Power Moons and varying coin currencies; the more you surrender to the whims of *Odyssey*, the better your experience is going to be.

Odyssey rewards you for abandoning convention, for leaning on the strength of your imagination and ingenuity as you look to uncover secrets, run freely through vibrant locales, and dutifully experiment with an almost gleeful abandon. And with each Kingdom coming with its own unique currency, required should you wish to get out of those horrible dungarees (they are *so* last season) and »

IN BRIEF
Travel between all-new Kingdoms, collecting Power Moons and possessing Goombas along the way, to end some unholy matrimony.





MARIO MISDEMEANOURS

New Donk City is the most realistic urban environment Mario has ever found himself in, walking shoulder-to-shoulder with the basically human 'New Donkers' (don't ask). Policing is a problem in the city, but we've been keeping a watch on his activities.

TRESPASSING

1 Whatever Mario wants, he will take it. He doesn't care that most of the city is out of bounds, and you'll quickly find that he has a deep-rooted obsession with criminal trespassing in the third degree. A Class B Misdemeanour, he'd expect a small fine and a slap on the wrist.

POSSESSION

2 Possession isn't covered by US law, at least, not officially, but Mario's new-found obsession with taking over a person's consciousness against their will could *technically* be classified as abduction or unlawful restraint. Jail time, huge fines and public shaming, Mario will never return to the Mushroom Kingdom after this.

CRIMINAL MISCHIEF

3 While looking for Power Moons Mario has a tendency to let nothing get in his way. Need to get to a platform or ledge? He'll just leap on top of a vehicle, intentionally causing criminal damage. This is a Class A misdemeanour, and it carries a potential sentence of up to one year in jail and $1,000 in fines.

JAY-WALKING

4 Mario doesn't observe the rules of the road in New Donk City, happily running out in front of moving vehicles, disrupting traffic flow and generally crossing whenever the mood takes him. This would carry a $500 fine, but he'd quickly find himself in a court room.



THE KEY MECHANICS

→ What's up Mario's sleeve and under his iconic hat?

MOTION CONTROLLED

1 Nintendo hasn't abandoned its *Super Mario Galaxy* design entirely; in fact, you'll find that *Odyssey* has also been largely designed to work best with motion controls. With a joy-con in each hand, you'll find that you have tight and precise control over Mario's actions and movements – flicking Cappy intuitively with a flick of the wrist. While *Odyssey* does support the use of a Pro Controller, Nintendo has designed the game expressly with motion control in mind.

CAPPY-ENHANCED

2 Traditional power-ups are largely non-existent in *Odyssey*, thanks in part to Mario's cap now coming with new powers. Cappy can be thrown and held in place to swat at enemies or activate objects, swung around to quash hordes of Goombas, or can even be used to possess other items and characters to help you solve puzzles and overcome obstacles. Once you've seen a Bullet Bill wearing a red cap and rocking a 'tache you can never go back.

FREE-FLOW

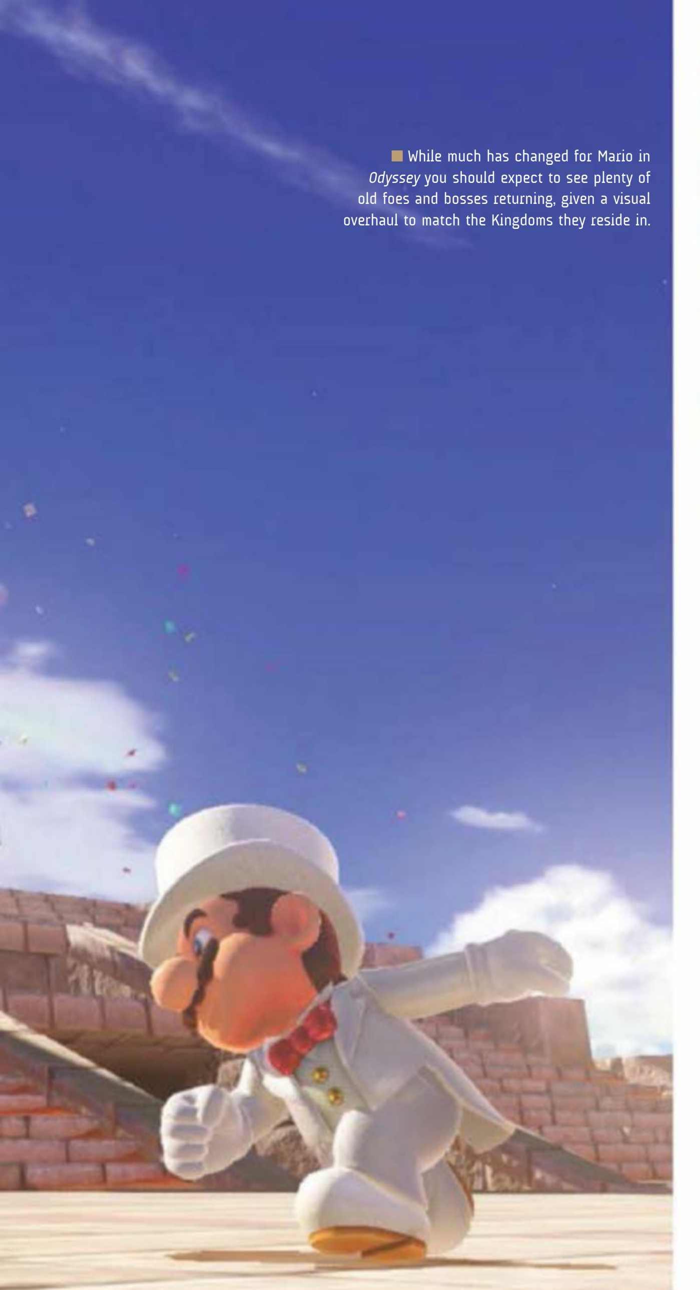
3 One of the best things about *Odyssey* is how open-ended its play feels. When playing in a room full of other journalists, a cursory glance across to the other screens would reveal scores of players all in the same area completing vastly different objectives. It speaks to how open and dense these Kingdom areas truly are, with secrets and fun to be found in every corner. It's truly impressive, a fantastic expansion of the *Super Mario Sunshine* design.

THE ODYSSEY

4 Mario's ship is called The Odyssey, and it's what you'll use to travel between each of the six Kingdoms. It's not just a way to cleverly mask loading times, though, as you'll also be able to use it to showcase special items you've found in the worlds and use its wardrobe to change in and out of the various outfits Mario is able to acquire in his journeys – each of which is a homage to a game from the plumber's fascinating and varied past.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

5 Mario will run into a few old acquaintances during his travels. The most notable examples so far are a returning Pauline, who now presides over Metro Kingdom's New Donk City as its mayor, and Captain Toad, found hanging out on some scaffolding, offering a Power Moon in exchange for your conversation. It'll also be a chance to make a few new friends, as Mario visits larger-than-life locales such as the prehistoric Fossil Falls and the sandy planes of Tostarena.



While much has changed for Mario in *Odyssey* you should expect to see plenty of old foes and bosses returning, given a visual overhaul to match the Kingdoms they reside in.



buy new holiday threads, to the tourist brochure maps that only fill with information the further you explore and interact with everything around you, this is one holiday you'll want to spend a few months enjoying.

THE NINTENDO EFFECT

If the release of *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, *Arms* and *Splatoon 2* have proved anything this year, it's that Nintendo is interested in perfecting existing genres rather than inventing new ones right now. *Odyssey* is a 3D Mario adventure designed for the 'core', the first since *Super Mario Sunshine*, and it feels truly fantastic. It's a pure and often thrilling refinement of the platformer, effortlessly striking a balance between action, exploration and puzzle solving.

Collecting Power Moons is a core-conceit for progression, but it feels far faster and more intertwined with the overall experience than that of gathering Stars and Shines. They are *everywhere*, to be found in the strangest of places. It encourages you to explore every corner of *Odyssey*'s sandbox-style levels – the focus of these areas is absolutely on depth rather the size – which is an action you will delight in participating in because movement and motion is so *perfectly* realised.

Precise and beautifully executed, playing a Mario game has never felt this good. That's a bold statement, but then this is Nintendo taking another bold step forward. This series isn't breaking the mould it carved out for itself so many decades ago, it's simply refining it into its purest, most exciting form. That makes *Super Mario Odyssey* something of a wonder. Nintendo has extracted the variety of *Super Mario Galaxy*, pulling it out from its strict mission-based structure, and flooded it into the sandbox design that made *Sunshine* so beloved – the ingenuity of *Mario 64* presiding over all of it. Every time we have had the opportunity to play *Odyssey*, the same two areas, we have – by pure accident – found something new to do, something new to be found and enjoyed. That isn't to be overlooked or ignored; it should be used as a signal that this game is going to be something truly special.

> "PRECISE AND BEAUTIFULLY EXECUTED, PLAYING A MARIO GAME HAS NEVER FELT THIS GOOD"



The ability to possess enemies and items completely opens up the game. This is the most varied and experimental Mario game ever.







WHY WE'RE SO EXCITED FOR STAR FOX 2

→ THE SNES GAME WE NEVER THOUGHT WE'D GET TO PLAY

FORMAT: **SNES** | PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
RELEASE: **29 SEPTEMBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1-2**

IN BRIEF
Near-finished and yet cancelled on the eve of the N64's release, this long-lost Star Fox adventure is finally arriving with the SNES Mini this year

While the prospect of a Nintendo Classic Mini SNES would have been exciting enough for us, the addition of *Star Fox 2*, a long-lost game from the SNES canon, finished, but never released, took things up a notch. Fans have often wondered, but rarely dared to hope, if Nintendo would return to this mysterious game so that it might be completed and released legitimately.

But what actually made *Star Fox 2* a game worth resurrecting? We take a closer look at what the game promised, why it was ultimately cancelled and how its biggest ideas actually lived on.



■ A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY: The original Star Fox was Nintendo's effort to capture the appeal of the Star Trek and Star Wars universe, but by 1995 it was beginning to look dated

IT WAS INSPIRED BY MORE STRATEGIC PLAY

1 The original *Star Fox* was Miyamoto and Nintendo's attempt to recreate the space action of Star Trek and Star Wars in videogame form, but what it lacked was some of the strategic element of deep space dogfighting. The intention with *Star Fox 2* was to introduce some of that focus to the series.

IT FEATURED A SUPER FX CHIP 2

2 The first game famously bolstered the abilities of the SNES with a Super FX Chip and this sequel would have expanded things further. The Super FX Chip 2 boasted twice the memory and vastly improved processing, allowing for much more complex and free-flowing gameplay than what was possible before.

IT INTRODUCED ALL-RANGE MODE

3 The biggest addition was a first attempt at all-range mode, the 3D, free movement space that would be introduced to the series futher down the line. The fact that this free roam 3D space was being achieved on the SNES console is pretty incredible when you consider the power Nintendo was drawing from.

IT WAS ONLY TIMING THAT KILLED IT

4 With the Super FX Chip 2 in development and the game pushed back a year, Nintendo found itself only six months from the Nintendo 64 releasing and didn't like the idea of asking fans to pay for a game on an older, relatively out of date system. With the PlayStation on the market it would have looked very dated.

IT ALL PAID OFF IN STAR FOX 64

5 The hard work didn't go to waste, though, as all the concepts and designs were fed into *Star Fox 64* with the additional processing power of the new console allowing the team to more fully explore the sci-fi movie experience it wanted to honour. All-range mode, the introduction of tanks and so on all came from *Star Fox 2*.

Left: Getting your hands on a SNES Mini is going to prove tricky once again as demand is incredibly high for this device.

THE JAPAN-ONLY GAMES

➔ Here's what you could have had

FIRE EMBLEM: MYSTERY OF THE EMBLEM



The third game in the *Fire Emblem* series, originally released in 1994, might have been a nice addition for the western SNES Mini, not least as one of the fastest selling in the series until the launch of *Awakening* in 2012. This one stings a little.

THE LEGEND OF THE MYSTICAL NINJA



Goemon has perhaps never been a massive star in the West so it makes some sense that this game wouldn't be deemed essential for America and Europe, but we were rather fond of the little brawler back in the day so this one's a shame to lose.

PANEL DE PON



Better known to those of us outside of Japan as *Tetris Attack*, the story of this release is oddly similar to that of *Super Mario Bros. 2* in which a game that had nothing to do with Mario was converted to include characters from his universe. Not necessarily a great loss.

SUPER SOCCER



Sports games from this era can often date pretty badly but it is odd that in Europe at least we're not getting a football game to enjoy. It might be a little slow and cumbersome for modern sensibilities, and frankly we would have rather had FIFA or ISS anyway.

SSF II: THE NEW CHALLENGERS



While North America and Europe will be playing *Street Fighter II Turbo*, Japan will get *Super Street Fighter II* and we think we're getting the better end of that deal. Sure, it means no Cammy or T. Hawk, but the speedier gameplay of Turbo is our preference.

"IF YOU CAN MASTER HIS HUGE POTENTIAL, YOU WILL WIN GAMES OUTRIGHT."

HOW DOOMFIST PROVES THE GENIUS OF OVERWATCH CHARACTER DESIGN

→ WHO IS DOOMFIST, WHERE DOES HE FIT INTO OVERWATCH, AND WHO IS HE GOOD AGAINST?

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **1-12**

Doomfist has been floating around the universe of *Overwatch* since the game was announced in 2014, but now he's finally in the game, ready to get his punch on. He's certainly a bolt of lightning to the current roster of heroes, too – his rocket punch is one of the strongest non-ultimate abilities in the game, able to kill any non-tank hero if fully charged and the punched hero hits a wall. With a cool down of only a couple seconds, too, it gives Doomfist a huge potential for one hit kills.

He's a surprisingly mobile hero, which is great as the current meta rewards movement most. He can move with mobile characters like Tracer, Genji, Winston and D.VA on attack, but can also counter diving heroes. His power to kill flanking offence characters can really scupper teams trying to disorientate you with their mobility. It's why he fits nicely right into the game where it is right now. That's not always been true of new heroes.

Keep in mind, Doomfist is a difficult character to play, with a high skill ceiling. Much like Genji, if you can master his huge potential, you will win games outright. If you overextend and find yourself in the backline with all of your abilities on cooldown, you will be dying a whole bunch. Having said that, he is just what *Overwatch* could use right now, and he has one of the most unique skill sets in the whole game. Importantly, he might well just be the most fun character to play in *Overwatch* to date.

IN BRIEF
Overwatch is a super-charged FPS game based around vibrant heroes, considered team tactics and moments of intricate power plays.

STRONG AGAINST

SUPPORTS



Just about any support is going to have a rough time with Doomfist. His mobility and his ability to defeat any of them on a whim makes him a real danger for any backline.

D.VA



D.VA has found herself thrust into the higher end of the meta, recently, for her ability to fly around and eat all incoming damage. She won't stop a Rocket Punch though, so Doomfist will have a field day with her.

BARRIERS



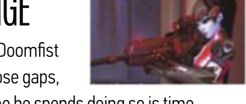
Barriers are reliable against just about any onslaught. They block everything and are a staple to most compositions. Not with Doomfist. His Rocket Punch will blast through Reinhardt, Orisa and Winston's shields no problem.

WEAK AGAINST

PHARAH

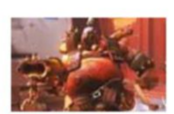
Pharah is more or less untouchable to Doomfist. While she's in the air, none of Doomfist's kit helps him. It's best to stay inside where you can, or she'll make mincemeat of the newest character.

RANGE



While Doomfist can close gaps, the time he spends doing so is time he isn't outputting damage. A Hanzo, McCree, Soldier 76 or Widowmaker who hit their shots will take out Doomfist before he's even close.

ROADHOG



Despite recently taking heavy nerfs, Doomfist is good news for Roadhog. Doomfist is most exposed when he's out of position. While 'Hog can't kill him with his hook/shot combo any more, his teammates will take advantaged of a hooked 'Fist.

WHITEDAY
a labyrinth named school

DARE YOU BRAVE THE NOTORIOUS KOREAN HORROR CLASSIC?


ESCAPE A HAUNTED SCHOOL IN THE YEAR'S MOST TERRIFYING REMAKE


RUN AND HIDE FROM KILLER STALKERS AND MALEVOLENT PHANTOMS


NINE DIFFERENT ENDINGS – WILL YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS SURVIVE?

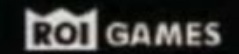
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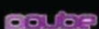












KINGDOM HEARTS III IS BACK ON TRACK

→ RELEASE WINDOW AND NEW WORLD CONFIRMED

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Now Square Enix has put *Final Fantasy XV* and its first DLC out into the world, all attention turns to *Kingdom Hearts III*. It's one of those franchises that is without question – for those that have enjoyed the main series entries or endured the confusing spin-offs in the past – one of the most anticipated new releases on the horizon. That's because it's going to offer a whirlwind adventure, bringing your Disney-fuelled childhood memories clashing together with the unbridled insanity of Final Fantasy's typically melodramatic storytelling.

Given how long this game has been in development, hype levels are starting to go through the roof, but it looks like Square Enix has everything in hand. Combat, in particular, is continuing to impress, with the system looking like a better-executed version of what we experienced in *Final Fantasy XV*. But then that's Kingdom Hearts all over. Square has been chipping away at this project for years, and it's clearly taking heed of the lessons it learned during the protracted *FFXV* development and applying them aptly to *Kingdom Hearts III*. With a release window of 2018 now locked down – fingers crossed the team will be able to hit it – this long awaited sequel is finally within arm's reach.

WE FINALLY HAVE A RELEASE WINDOW

Announced in 2013 and teased for many a year longer, *Kingdom Hearts III* is finally in our sights – the game many have been waiting to play since *Kingdom Hearts II* wrapped over a decade ago. The title is going to launch in 2018 for PS4 and Xbox One, with director Tetsuya Nomura blaming Square's decision to switch development from an internal engine (likely *FFXV*'s Luminous Studio) to the burgeoning Unreal Engine 4.

THE PIXAR DREAM

While we knew that *Kingdom Hearts III* was going to be a stunner, it's the introduction of the Toy Story universe that's really hammered it home. The characters look almost exactly as they did on the big screen, with Square Enix managing to hit the sweet spot between distinctive art style, extreme detail and incredible animation. It's a real victory for the medium that the gap can be closed so dutifully.

IN BRIEF

Kingdom Hearts III sees the worlds of Disney and Final Fantasy collide in this huge adventure, a decade in the making.





A FRIEND IN ME

■ *Kingdom Hearts III* has already delighted with the small selection of classic Disney locales it has revealed so far, but the introduction of a Toy Story world is without question our new favourite. Interestingly, this convergence doesn't take place in a parallel world but in the official Disney cannon, meaning Woody and Buzz would have battled alongside Sora and friends before the events of *Toy Story 3* kicked off. Weird, huh?

HUGE SETPIECES

■ What's continuing to impress is *Kingdom Hearts III*'s dedication to introducing out-of-this-world combat situations. In particular, the title will give Sora giant bosses to do battle with, giving him a greater freedom of movement and room to experiment with new combinations of attacks. These include summon attacks based on theme park rides – the latest of which is based on Buzz Lightyear's Astro Blasters, which are as ridiculous as they sound, and just a stretch more fantastical.

10 THINGS YOU OUGHT TO KNOW ABOUT BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2



→ A CLOSER LOOK AT THE INSANE AMBITION OF THIS LONG-AWAITED PREQUEL

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** | DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTPELLIER** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

YOU MAKE YOUR OWN CHARACTER

1 Whether you want to play as a human or a genetically modified hybrid (like monkey Knox) is entirely up to you. Although given the social structures of the game it might lead to some different conversation options and interactions as you play.

AND YOU START WITH NOTHING

2 As *Beyond Good & Evil 2* begins you will not have a ship, crew or much of anything. You will have a basic vehicle, but not even a fancy bike like the one you can see in the first *BG&E2* trailer. You'll need to do jobs and missions to earn enough for that.

YOU BUILD UP A CREW

3 As you play you'll meet other characters who you can convince to join you as part of a party. Buy a fighter ship and they can help you pilot it and eventually as you earn bigger ships they can be your crew. Their skills will add bonuses to your ship too.

AND THEY'LL REACT TO YOUR CHOICES

4 Do something illegal, horrible or somehow disagreeable to a member of your crew and they may not stick around long. There will be a reaction system in the game according to the development team that will see them make judgements about you as you play.

YOU GRADUALLY EARN VEHICLES

5 From the speedy hover bike to the massive space-faring vessel we saw in the trailer, you can earn your way up to greater mobility, firepower and ultimately freedom as you go through the story. Your ragtag bunch are all about escaping the corporate chains.

IN BRIEF

After 15 years Michel Ancel is back with *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, this time offering a multiplayer and co-op prequel to Jade's adventure

"THE DAY AND NIGHT CYCLE OF PLANETS IS BASED ON THEIR ORBIT AND ROTATION AROUND A STAR, NOT AS A PRE-DETERMINED LIGHTING RIG OR ANIMATION."



YOU'RE A SPACE PIRATE AT HEART

6 Ubisoft likes the idea of being a pirate because to its mind it means being accepting of anyone, regardless of upbringing or appearance. If you're a pirate then that's your identity and anything else people might see is irrelevant. It's a nice, inclusive message.

THERE ARE NO LOADING TIMES

7 The scale of the game is pretty impressive with so many different sizes of ship (with explorable interiors) and massive cities you can move around. Just as impressive is the promise of no loading times between areas as you make your war around.

EVEN BETWEEN PLANETS

8 And then you point your ship towards the stars and zip off out of the atmosphere, orbiting the planet, out of orbit towards another world. And still no loading. You orbit a new world and enter the atmosphere, down to a new continent and city. Still no loading.

SUNSETS AND RISES ARE PHYSICS BASED

9 A fun demonstration made by game director Michel Ancel of the lighting system was that the day and night cycle of planets is based on their orbit and rotation around a star, not as a pre-determined lighting rig or animation. A very nice touch.

AND YES, YOU CAN TAKE PICTURES

10 Would it really be a *Beyond Good & Evil* follow-up if you couldn't use a camera in game to take pictures? We think not, so that's what you'll be able to do, uncovering criminal activity and corporate corruption as you go.

1

3

2

4

"THIS IS THE CRAZIEST 911 PORSCHE HAS EVER MADE"
LEE SIBLEY, TOTAL911

IN BRIEF
Turn 10 leads the charge of the Xbox One X with this 4K, 60fps racing experience and a special appearance from Porsche's latest creation.

WHY THE PORSCHE 911 GT2 RS IN **FORZA 7** IS SO EXCITING



→ TOTAL911 EDITOR LEE SIBLEY TALKS US THROUGH THE KEY POINTS OF THIS EXCLUSIVE SUPERCAR APPEARANCE

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** | DEVELOPER: **TURN 10** | RELEASE: **3 OCT 2017** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

A WORLD FIRST

1 The appearance of Porsche's new 911 GT2 RS at the official *Forza 7* launch in June should not be overlooked – this was the first time a new car made its worldwide debut in a videogame before being revealed in the metal. The result of a partnership between Porsche and Microsoft, first deliveries of the physical car coincide with the on-sale date of *Forza 7* in October, meaning the race is well and truly on between game owners and car owners to see who will drive the car first.

THE MOST BONKERS 911 YET

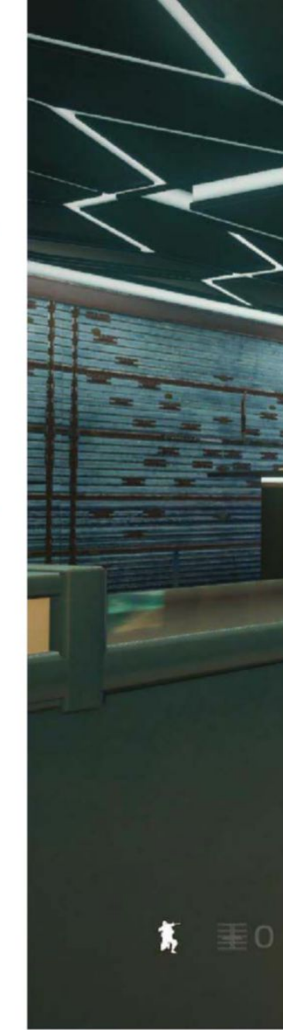
2 Without question, this is the craziest 911 Porsche has ever made, smashing lots of internal records: at 700hp it's the most powerful 911 ever, with a 0-62mph time of 2.8 seconds meaning it's also the quickest. A top speed of 211mph means it's the fastest, too, and its sub seven-minute lap time of the famous Nürburgring Nordschleife is also the best-ever time for a 911 of any variant. In short, then, this is a car you'll be desperate to experience on *Forza 7* or otherwise.

BREAKING FROM TRADITION

3 RS 911s have been around for more than 40 years now and are the road-legal version of the German manufacturers' highly successful race cars. However, almost all of them have been powered by naturally aspirated engines. Only this new 991-generation GT2 RS and the previous-generation 997 GT2 RS (of which just 500 cars were made worldwide) are the only 911 Rennsports to utilise turbochargers for more power.

HARD TO SPOT

4 The new car isn't going to be built on a numbered production run, but numbers of this new firebreather will be strictly limited, with around 30 coming to the UK, for example. Twinned with a likely price tag of around a quarter of a million after options, the car will appeal to collectors immediately, meaning the chance of you seeing an actual car on the road is going to be slim. *Forza 7*, then, will likely be your best chance of getting to know what is possibly the best 911 Porsche ever.



HOW THE COMMUNITY SAVED RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

WHY YOU NEED TO TUNE IN TO PRO LEAGUE SEASON TWO FINALS AT GAMESCOM 2017

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** | DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **10**

***R**ainbow Six Siege* **was troubled from the start; extenuating circumstances and a host of avoidable issues contributed to that fact.** Just weeks before *Siege* was scheduled to release, horrific attacks in Paris would limit what the marketing team could do. Add in a variety of network and server issues, complaints surrounding microtransactions, and concerns over yet another post-E3 graphical downgrade, and you can start to see why the first few months of *Siege*'s life were not quite what many had hoped it would be.

But then, four months after *Siege* launched, Ubisoft made an announcement that would change everything. It had teamed up with ESL, arguably the world's biggest eSports event organiser, to form the Rainbow Six Pro League. This competition would feature leagues for both the PC and Xbox One in Europe and North America, with a total prize pool of $100,000. This was something that the player base had wanted since day one, and when they finally got it they showed their support by tuning in and taking part in their thousands.

It all kicked off at the Intel Extreme Masters Katowice, one of the biggest stadium eSports events in the world, and it was there that *Siege* demonstrated its capacity to work brilliantly as a spectator sport. The attack versus defence modes, which sees the defending team attempting to outsmart attackers with carefully placed traps, resulted in some brilliant mind games and technical play from the top level. In spite of *Siege*'s slow pace, games can quickly turn into all-out bloodbaths – it can take just seconds for a match to turn from tense and tactical to fiery and exciting.

> "ONCE AGAIN RECORDS ARE EXPECTED TO BE BROKEN."

The development team began to notice a correlation between its large events and an increase in player activity. But it wasn't just lapsed players jumping back into *Siege*, but a fresh wave of Operators that had passed the game up the first time around; this enthusiasm led to *Siege* tripling its active players compared to those of the launch window. Typically, multiplayer-focussed games see a big drop-off after the initial buzz fizzles out; this kind of growth is practically unheard of, but easy to understand once you see the passion exhibited by players and spectators alike.

Looking to capitalise on the momentum the community had generated, Ubisoft went ahead with The Six Invitational, the first ever world championship for *Siege*. Taking place earlier this year, the tournament peaked with 120,000 concurrent viewers on streaming platforms. The impact on the back-end was almost immediate, with *Siege* experiencing one of its biggest player spikes to date – the average player count has, unsurprisingly, remained higher than ever.

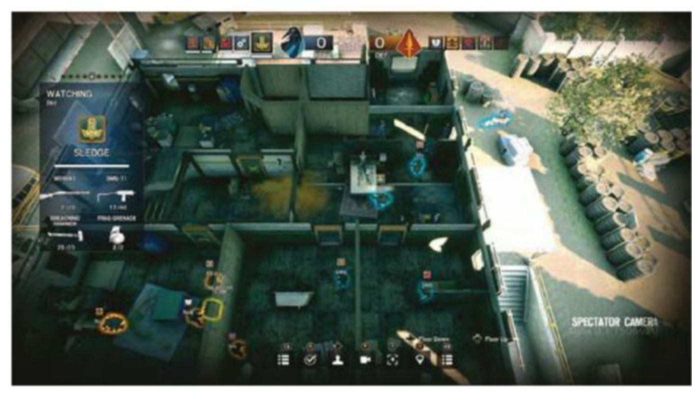
And so the next LAN finals of the Pro League will take place at Gamescom and once again records are expected to be broken. There will undoubtedly be another massive surge in players as would-be tactical masterminds watch the best in the world battle it out in front of thousands, and then try to replicate the biggest plays themselves from the comfort of their homes.

It is clear that the eSports circuit has had a massive effect on what is now one of the biggest shooters on the market. Initially it looked like *Siege* would struggle to survive, remembered for its good ideas and troubled execution. But now, a year and half on from launch, *Siege* is bigger than ever.

Try as publishers might, it's impossible to force a game into being a successful eSport. It takes a real community – a very real passion and enthusiasm from the players – to drive it forward and solidify its position on the circuit. *Siege* has been a success in that respect, finding in its community the marketing and energy that it failed to harness at launch. It might be a little generous to say that eSports single handedly saved *Rainbow Six Siege*, but it certainly isn't too far from the truth.

Above: The tactical elements of *Siege* mean that it can go from a slow paced waiting game to an all out firefight within seconds. This makes for some great viewing and gets the adrenaline pumping even for those not playing. **Right:** The top players figured out advanced tactics such as locations where you can almost spawn kill other players. **Below:** New DLC packs add new operators that have unique abilities. These add even more depth to the competitive landscape.





IN BRIEF

A strategic multiplayer shooter that sees attackers try to enter a fortified building with traps laid by defenders, who will take up positions to stop them.

THE RAINBOW SIX SIEGE WORLD CHAMPIONS

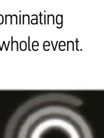
→ The teams at the top of their game

ELEVATE

XBOX ONE WORLD CHAMPIONS

Elevate were crowned as the first, and most likely last, official Xbox One world champions, as the Pro League is now a PC only competition. When the league first started out, Elevate were towards the bottom of the standings, but a year of hard work saw them rise through the ranks before eventually winning the Six Invitational in dominating fashion, only dropping a single map in the whole event.

CONTINUUM



PC WORLD CHAMPIONS

American team Continuum managed to become the first ever PC World Champions despite only making it to the top levels of play just a few months beforehand. They took down the experienced eRa Eternity side in a thrilling final that came right down to the final few rounds of the last map. The team is known for being very hyper and loud when playing on stage.

"EVERY GAME WE MAKE WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO PUT 30 OR 40 IMPROVEMENTS IN FOR ONE TO BE RECOGNISED."
ARTHUR PARSONS, TT GAMES

■ Right: Agent Venom is a version of the classic Spidey villain that some may not be familiar with, but it's actually the same Flash Thompson we know and loathe, except he's now training with SHIELD and becoming a hero.

■ Left: Fans of the Inhumans have been bemoaning their depiction in a recently released trailer for a new TV show, but this looks like classic Medusa to us.

■ Right: Yep, that's a dog, better known to Marvel fans as Lockjaw, a member of the Inhumans who can teleport, among other things. Good to see the list of canine companions in 2017 is getting stronger.

THE "LIVING COMIC" OF LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES 2

➔ TT GAMES IS EVOLVING WITH LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES 2 AS WE DISCOVER FROM ARTHUR PARSONS

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC, SWITCH** | PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS.** | DEVELOPER: **TT GAMES** | RELEASE: **14 NOVEMBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

As TT Games heads towards another massive sequel in its plethora of ongoing series, it knows that it needs to step things up a little. We've always enjoyed the LEGO releases, but over time we have, perhaps, started taking them for granted. We want something new and fresh and thankfully so does TT Games.

To do that, it's creating a new world where it can smash together heroes and villains from Marvel's many timelines and universes so we can see icons of page and screen together in blocky form. So, *LEGO Marvel* will now bring us Spider-Gwen, Spider-Man, as well as the 2099 and Noir versions into one place to play together. And all in a gigantic new city.

How do you pick the preferred look of your Marvel heroes between their comicbook incarnation or cinematic appearances?

In *LEGO Marvel Superheroes*, the first one, and I'm assuming the second one, will follow the same route, the spectrum of people that play it is not just those six to 12-year old kids, it's actually everyone. As such we need to make sure that we're ticking boxes for everyone, so it could be little Johnny's first ever videogame and it could be that he's six years old and this year he saw Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 2. It's the first time he's ever watched a movie, it's the first time he's ever been exposed to Marvel. He therefore needs to see *those* Guardians. If we're going to have Yondu, we need to have Rooker's Yondu, not original, classic Yondu.

So, the important thing is that when a character exists in the popular mindset that they tick those boxes and if not they are a visually reminiscent version of them?

If we're picking a classic character then, someone like Green Goblin, we'll pick classic Green Goblin, the much loved one…

Rather than the Willem Defoe one?

Exactly, because we are after all telling an original comic book story. The way that we've written is in tandem with our Marvel writer, in order to get the best story we've got twists and turns and all sorts of awesome stuff going on. It's a living, breathing comic. We're using predominantly classic looks and then obviously for some of the stuff that's around now and into next year there will be the movie visuals. That's not to say that we won't put alternate versions in as well. You never know. It's exciting.

Has having such a multifaceted city as Chronopolis opened up options for you in terms of scope, gameplay and scale?

Yes, very much so. Chronopolis has been quite the undertaking. To get the layout right, to get the feel of it right and to hide little things away, we've got a little area of K'un-Lun in there, hidden away in the mountains. The way that Chronopolis opens up, as a player when you're actually playing the game, you don't know that you're in Chronopolis. Stuff happens and you're sent about saving the earth, you think, by Wasp in Avengers mansion and then very quickly it's apparent that you should be tracking down various bad guys and having various boss fights early on in quick succession and it's very apparent very quickly that something weird is going on. Then when the walls of Chronopolis come down, which are these time forcefields, when those walls fall and there's the big reveal of Chronopolis it's that sort of wow moment.

And then there's time manipulation as well?

This isn't *Blinx*, this isn't something where you're wholesale going to be able to fast-forward or rewind through entire levels. This is about time manipulation in terms of there being elements where time is used against you and then you can also play areas so Doctor Strange is able to move time forwards and backwards. It will be on objects and certain things. There might be a collapsed elevator and he can reverse time to make the elevator go back up. Or it may be that you accelerate time so instead of there being a pile of dirt you might get a massive tree grow out of it. It's that sort of thing of forwards and backwards with it, but it's definitely a big part of the game. Kang is a 40th century time traveller; It's only right that there are portals between realities, it's only right that there's time manipulation. It just feels right for this game.

IN BRIEF

The many universes of Marvel come together as the time manipulating Kang brings the best and brightest into his new city of Chronopolis

One of the most common things we hear as a criticism of the LEGO games, and we're sure you hear too, is that there's a sameness or templated feel to them. Do you accept that as a criticism or do you feel like the base template is a strength?

It's a weird one. Since 2005 we've been making the LEGO games and there is a core LEGO DNA. We set ourselves goals of making fun, humorous, authentic, family-friendly value games; those are our values. Yes, you could look at it and go "Aren't they formulaic?". Well, they feel similar because obviously they're LEGO, but every game we make we actually have to put 30 or 40 improvements in for one to be recognised. With *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes 2* rather than just make those minor improvements here and there, we're actually trying to just shake everything.

With moving just to next-gen platforms, if they can still be called that, that's allowing us to take that breath and go "Right, take a step back, let's look at what people don't like, let's look at what people want to see us move on with and improve and what we want to improve and let's really go for it". Whereas the first game was a launch title on PS4 and set that new benchmark for the LEGO games in terms of size and enjoyment, for *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes 2* we want to move that bar up and really go, "Yes, that first one was great, but it's just a foundation and this is what we're going to deliver this time."

CITIZEN CRITICS' CHOICE

➔ WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE BEST AND WORST USER RATINGS ON METACRITIC FOR THE CURRENT MAIN SYSTEMS

Some of you may visit a site called Metacritic, which aggregates review scores some sites and publications (like games™) and collates them into an average. But what it also does is offer gamers the chance to review the games themselves generating an average User Score. Sometimes these can be very different from the critic scores, so we thought we'd take a closer look and see if any patterns emerge*.

THE CRITICAL GAP

➔ The games with the biggest gap between critics and Metacritic users

PS4	CRITICS	USERS	DIFFERENCE
SKYLANDERS SUPERCHARGERS	81	(3.6)	-45
DEAD OR ALIVE XTREME 3: FORTUNE	43	(7.6)	+33

XBOX ONE	CRITICS	USERS	DIFFERENCE
THE INNER WORLD	77	(1.3)	-64
ACTION NEWS HEROES	49	(8.1)	+32

SWITCH	CRITICS	USERS	DIFFERENCE
ACA NEOGEO: BLAZING STARS	84	(6.0)	-24
HAS BEEN HEROES	52	(7.5)	+23

PC	CRITICS	USERS	DIFFERENCE
OUT OF THE PARK BASEBALL 2007	96	(2.5)	-71
NAVY SEALS: WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION	18	(8.0)	+62

PS VITA / 3DS





BEST GAMES

	PS VITA		3DS	
1	PERSONA 4 GOLDEN RPG • ATLUS	9.2	FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING STRATEGY • NINTENDO	9.1
2	SALT AND SANCTUARY ACTION • SKA STUDIOS	9.2	TLOZ: MAJORA'S MASK 3D RPG • NINTENDO	9.1
3	STEINS;GATE VISUAL NOVEL • PQUBE	9.2	3D SHINOBI III: RETURN OF THE NINJA MASTER ACTION • SEGA	9.0
4	STEINS;GATE 0 VISUAL NOVEL • PQUBE	9.0	PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY VISUAL NOVEL • CAPCOM	8.9
5	UTAWARERUMONO: MASK OF DECEPTION VISUAL NOVEL • ATLUS	9.0	TLOZ: OCARINA OF TIME 3D RPG • NINTENDO	8.9
6	KILLZONE: MERCENARY FPS • SONY	8.9	TLOZ: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS RPG • NINTENDO	8.9
7	TEARAWAY ACTION • SONY	8.9	KID ICARUS: UPRISING ACTION • NINTENDO	8.8
8	DECEPTION IV: THE NIGHTMARE PRINCESS RPG • TECMO KOEI	8.9	KIRBY: TRIPLE DELUXE ACTION • NINTENDO	8.8
9	DRAGON QUEST BUILDERS ACTION • SQUARE ENIX	8.9	ZERO ESCAPE: VIRTUE'S LAST REWARD VISUAL NOVEL • RISING STAR GAMES	8.8
10	ZERO ESCAPE: VIRTUE'S LAST REWARD VISUAL NOVEL • RISING STAR GAMES	8.8	3D SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2 ACTION • SEGA	8.8

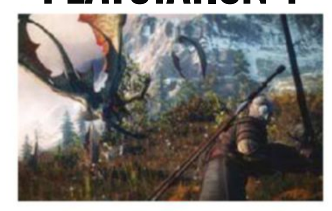
WORST GAMES

	PS VITA		3DS	
10	TABLE SOCCER SPORTS • SONY	3.6	FIFA 15 SPORTS • EA	2.4
9	TYPE: RIDER ACTION • BULKYPIX	3.5	ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON 3D STRATEGY • ATARI	2.3
8	CHRONOVOLT PUZZLE • PLAYERTHREE	3.2	WRECK-IT RALPH ACTION • ACTIVISION	2.3
7	FIFA 15 PUZZLE • EA	3.2	FIFA 14: LEGACY EDITION SPORTS • EA	2.0
6	STARLIGHT INCEPTION ACTION • ESCAPE HATCH ENTERTAINMENT	2.9	DUCK DYNASTY SPORTS • ACTIVISION	1.7
5	A VIRUS NAMED TOM PUZZLE • MISFITS ATTIC	2.8	CARTOON NETWORK: BATTLE CRASHERS ACTION • GAMEMILL ENTERTAINMENT	1.5
4	LEGO THE HOBBIT ACTION • WARNER BROS.	2.5	FAST & FURIOUS: SHOWDOWN RACING • ACTIVISION	1.4
3	ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS PUZZLE • ROVIO ENTERTAINMENT	2.1	BLAZBLUE: CLONEPHANTASMA ACTION • ARC SYSTEM WORKS	1.4
2	FIFA 14 SPORTS • EA	1.8	DISNEY INFINITY: TOY BOX CHALLENGE ACTION • DISNEY	1.0
1	DINO DINI'S KICK OFF REVIVAL SPORTS • THE DIGITAL LOUNGE	1.5	SPONGEBOB HEROPANTS ACTION • ACTIVISION	1.0





PLAYSTATION 4



THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	RPG • BANDAI NAMCO	9.2
THE LAST OF US REMASTERED	ACTION • SONY	9.1
FINAL FANTASY XIV: STORMBLOOD	RPG • SQUARE ENIX	9.1
PERSONA 5	RPG • ATLUS	9.0
CRASH BANDICOOT N.SANE TRILOGY	ACTION • ACTIVISION	9.0
BLOODBORNE	RPG • SONY	8.8
DARK SOULS III	RPG • BANDAI NAMCO	8.8
WIPEOUT OMEGA COLLECTION	RACING • SONY	8.8
RATCHET & CLANK	ACTION • SONY	8.7
ROCKET LEAGUE	SPORTS • PSYONIX	8.7

5 STAR WRESTLING: REGENESIS	SPORTS • SERIOUS PARODY	1.2
FIREFIGHTERS: THE SIMULATION	SIMULATION • UIE	1.0
CARTOON NETWORK: BATTLE CRASHERS	ACTION • GAMEMILL ENTERTAINMENT	0.9
MASTERCUBE	SHOOTER • ERTEM YAZILIM	0.8
RBI BASEBALL 17	SPORTS • MLB.COM	0.8
GHOSTBUSTERS	SHOOTER • ACTIVISION	0.7
RANDALL	ACTION • WE THE FORCE	0.6
ORC SLAYER	FPS • COOPLY SOLUTIONS	0.5
HORSE RACING 2016	RACING • YASH FUTURE TECH SOLUTIONS	0.3
YASAI NINJA	ACTION • RECOTECHNOLOGY	0.2

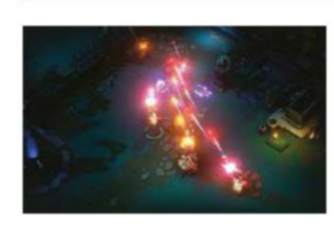


XBOX ONE

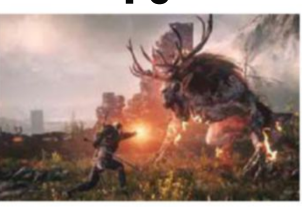


DREAMFALL CHAPTERS	ADVENTURE • DEEP SILVER	9.3
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	RPG • BANDAI NAMCO	9.2
THE GOLF CLUB 2	SPORTS • MAXIMUM GAMES	9.2
EVERSPACE	ACTION • ROCKFISH GAMES	9.0
SHANTAE: HALF-GENIE HERO	ACTION • WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES	8.8
GINGER: BEYOND THE CRYSTAL	ACTION • BADLAND GAMES	8.8
ITTLE DEW 2	RPG • NICALIS	8.8
ULTIMATE MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3	FIGHTING • CAPCOM	8.7
DARK SOULS III	RPG • BANDAI NAMCO	8.6
BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS	ACTION • 505 GAMES	8.6

SUPER DUNGEON BROS.	ACTION • THQ NORDIC	2.1
TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 5	SPORTS • ACTIVISION	2.1
RBI BASEBALL 17	SPORTS • MLB.COM	1.8
CHIME SHARP	ACTION • CHILLED MOUSE	1.7
NASCAR HEAT EVOLUTION	ACTION • 704GAMES	1.5
BEN-HUR	ACTION • FLOAT HYBRID ENTERTAINMENT	1.4
HORSE RACING 2016	RACING • YASH FUTURE TECH SOLUTIONS	1.4
THE INNER WORLD	FIGHTING • HEADUP GAMES	1.3
AARU'S AWAKENING	RPG • LUMENOX	0.4
GHOSTBUSTERS	SHOOTER • ACTIVISION	0.2



PC

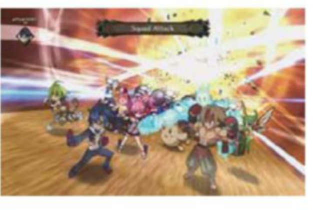


THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	RPG • BANDAI NAMCO	9.3
HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC III	STRATEGY • UBISOFT	9.2
PLANESCAPE: TORMENT	RPG • INTERPLAY ENTERTAINMENT	9.2
DEUS EX	RPG • EIDOS INTERACTIVE	9.2
BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN	RPG • BLACK ISLE STUDIOS	9.2
COUNTER-STRIKE	FPS • VALVE	9.2
DAY OF DEFEAT	FPS • VALVE	9.2
HALF-LIFE 2	FPS • VALVE	9.2
PORTAL	PUZZLE • VALVE	9.2
LEFT 4 DEAD	FPS • VALVE	9.2

FAST & FURIOUS: SHOWDOWN	DRIVING • ACTIVISION	1.1
LINE OF DEFENSE TACTICS	STRATEGY • 3000AD	1.0
ASHES CRICKET 2013	SPORTS • 505 GAMES	0.9
COLIN MCRAE RALLY	DRIVING • CODEMASTERS	0.9
BATTLECRUISER 3000 AD	SIMULATION • GAMETEK	0.8
DOMINIQUE PAMPLEMOUSSE	MUSIC • SQUINKIFER PRODUCTIONS	0.8
THE SLAUGHTERING GROUNDS	FPS • DIGITAL HOMICIDE STUDIOS	0.6
AIRPORT MASTER	STRATEGY • STICLI GAMES	0.6
GUISE OF THE WOLF	ADVENTURE • FUN CREATORS	0.5
GHOSTBUSTERS	SHOOTER • ACTIVISION	0.4



SWITCH



DISGAEA 5 COMPLETE	STRATEGY • NIS EUROPE	8.7
TLOZ: BREATH OF THE WILD	RPG • NINTENDO	8.4
MARIO KART 8 DELUXE	RACING • NINTENDO	8.3
THE JACKBOX PARTY PACK 3	PARTY • JACKBOX GAMES, INC.	8.3
SNIPPERCLIPS	PUZZLE • NINTENDO	8.2
THUMPER	ACTION • DROOL	8.2
WONDER BOY: THE DRAGON'S TRAP	ACTION • LIZARDCUBE	8.1
MIGHTY GUNVOLT BURST	ACTION • INTI CREATES	8.1
NEOGEO: THE KING OF FIGHTERS '98	FIGHTING • SNK PLAYMORE	8.0
NEOGEO: SAMURAI SHODOWN IV	FIGHTING • SNK PLAYMORE	8.0

OTHELLO	BOARD • ARC SYSTEM WORKS	6.6
ACA NEOGEO: KING OF FIGHTERS '94	FIGHTING • SNK PLAYMORE	6.5
ULTRA STREET FIGHTER II: TFC	FIGHTING • CAPCOM	6.4
ACA NEOGEO: SHOCK TROOPERS	SHOOTER • SNK PLAYMORE	6.4
ACA NEOGEO BLAZING STAR	SHOOTER • SNK PLAYMORE	6.0
SKYLANDERS IMAGINATORS	ACTION • ACTIVISION	5.4
JUST DANCE 2017	MUSIC • UBISOFT	5.3
1-2-SWITCH	PARTY • NINTENDO	4.8
NEW FRONTIER DAYS: FOUNDING PIONEERS	STRATEGY • ARC SYSTEM WORKS	4.7
VROOM IN THE NIGHT	SPORTS • POISOFT	3.3



*All figures true as of 7 July 2017

ASSESSING THE POWER LEVEL OF DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ



→ SPOILERS: IT'S RAPIDLY APPROACHING 9,000...

FORMAT: **PS4, PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **ARC SYSTEM WORKS** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1-2**



IN BRIEF
Arc looks to apply its abundant fighting game experience to both a three-on-three format and one of the world's most successful anime series.

The fighting game scene was so perfectly ready for a game like *Dragon Ball FighterZ* when it was announced, that it's hard to believe that it wasn't just made up on the spot to tick the boxes the competition hadn't. But no, as we know from its already playable state and absurd polish for a game that's still so far out, this was a case of Arc reading the field to perfection and readying something that could finally catapult it onto the global stage, where it has long belonged. Its dedication to Blazblue has been admirable, its reworking of Guilty Gear as a technological showpiece amazing to behold and now, by partnering with one of the biggest brands in the fields in which it excels (anime and fighting, for those who haven't been paying attention), the stage is set for something very special indeed, and here's why...



CAPCOM DROPPED THE BALL...

1 As much as *Street Fighter V* is a great game and currently deserves its headline spot at major competitions, a rough launch meant that it's not nearly in the dominant position its forerunner occupied. The king's throne has never looked more attainable, nor has there been a stronger candidate for succession than the team that has quietly been making some of the best 2D fighters of recent years.



...NOT ONCE, BUT TWICE

2 Marvel is usually a hype factory, but *MvC Infinite* has found itself under heavy scrutiny for both its MCU-focused roster and simplified 2v2 gameplay. Then, along comes a 3v3 fighter with assists and all the usual Marvel trimmings – this time cosplaying Goku rather than Wolverine – and allegiances seem very quick to change, plus the understudy seems more than capable in this instance. Not that Marvel doesn't also look interesting in its own way, mind.



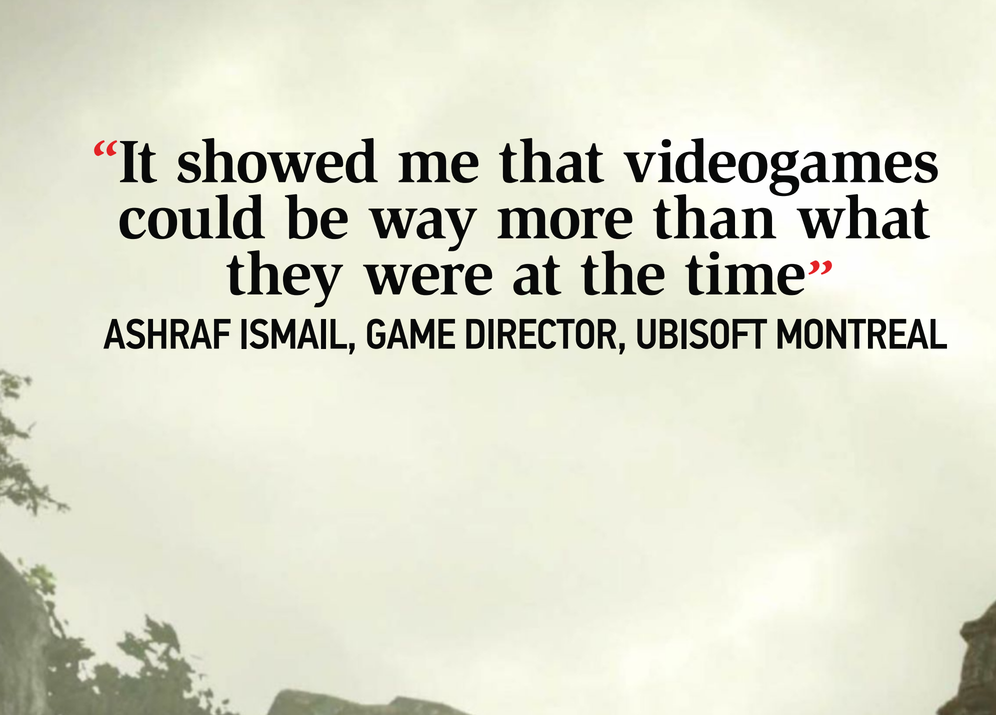
ANIME FIGHTERS ARE PURE HYPE

3 While they may currently fill the matinee slots of tourneys like EVO, the likes of Guilty Gear and Blazblue have given us some of the most memorable moments of competitive fighting in recent years. Not only does *FighterZ* bring with it *the* anime license to have, it also champions mechanics from anime-inspired fighters like Arcana Heart – fighting the anime war on two fronts, and both look incredibly comfortable.



GUILTY GEAR XRD WAS THE BEST ADVERT EVER

4 There are no question marks hanging over Unreal Engine when it comes to great-looking games. But as others were chasing photo-realism, Arc instead concocted a way to replicate 2D animation in 3D. Imagine being an anime creator and seeing *Guilty Gear Xrd* – we'd be falling over ourselves to partner with that team, and Bandai Namco has landed a truly talented bedfellow.



"It showed me that videogames could be way more than what they were at the time"

ASHRAF ISMAIL, GAME DIRECTOR, UBISOFT MONTREAL

WHY I ♥...

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

ASHRAF ISMAIL, GAME DIRECTOR, UBISOFT MONTREAL

You know, I still remember the first time that I played through Shadow Of The Colossus. *It's an experience that has stuck with me; it showed me that videogames could be way more than what they were at the time. It had me going after these beasts, these things that were, at first, imposing and scary. But then, as you begin to take them out… I'm used to The Legend Of Zelda music when I complete an objective [sings treasure opening jingle]; but when I put down one of these bosses, as it is falling, it was melancholy and sad. It made me feel like I had somehow done something wrong, but still the game was asking me to do it. It confused me, emotionally; it was the first time in a game that I started feeling these non-power trip emotions, and I was blown away by it. It was the first time that a game made me feel like I can have more emotions than 'look at me, look at my muscles' and it kind of blew me away. As a developer and as a gamer,* Shadow Of The Colossus *has meant a lot to me. To this day it's absolutely one of my favourite games.*



BRAVE NEW WORLD

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

UBISOFT MONTREAL DETAILS ITS MOST CHALLENGING PROJECT TO DATE: MAKING **ASSASSIN'S CREED**'S PAST PROBLEMS FEEL LIKE HISTORY



"WHEN DEVELOPMENT STARTED THREE AND A HALF YEARS AGO, WE SET OUT WITH THE INTENTION OF CHALLENGING OURSELVES. What we wanted to do was not only create an authentic Assassin's Creed game, but reinvent that core AC experience. We know that elements like combat, stealth and navigation are details that constantly need to be improved upon – made better and made to be part of a more cohesive experience," admits game director Ashraf Ismail, speaking with **games™** in a surprisingly frank interview long after the dust had settled on E3 2017. "And now we've opened the door to change whatever we wanted."

But it's difficult to escape the feeling that we've heard all of this before. From the moment of *Origins*' spectacular reveal it's been impressed upon us how the fundamentals of its design have been overhauled, reinvented in service of crafting an experience that "while unmistakably Assassin's Creed" will come to "represent a whole new beginning for the series".

> "BY THE END OF THE EXPERIENCE, I WANT PEOPLE TO WALK AWAY SAYING 'WOW, THIS WAS AN ASSASSIN'S CREED GAME THAT NEEDED TO HAPPEN'"
>
> ASHRAF ISMAIL
> GAME DIRECTOR

Given the series' contentious standing with a large contingency of the community, this defiant statement of intent should be cause for celebration. Why then is this messaging such an immediate red flag? Perhaps it's because this isn't overtly dissimilar to the way in which *Assassin's Creed Unity* was presented to us back in 2014. While Unity may well be remembered in the annals of history for its myriad technical bugs, narrative failings and comically acrimonious reception, behind it all was a game packed with fresh ideas and good intentions – even if, ultimately, its improved systems and updated mechanics failed to properly fuse with the laboured Assassin's Creed framework.

So why then would we put our faith back into Ubisoft Montreal, let alone this October's *Assassin's Creed Origins*? Could it be that we've had a deep-seated desire to explore the mysticism and »



POINTS OF INTEREST



I BAYEK

The hero of *AC: Origins*, Bayek is a descendant of a long line of warriors, called the Medjay. It's his journey throughout this game that will lead to the formation of the Assassin's Brotherhood, establishing much of the mythos that we experienced with Altair in the original *Assassin's Creed* game.



II SENU

Eagle Vision is now out of the game, being replaced by an eagle named Senu. Bayek is able to summon and command Senu to scout out ahead of him, finding targets, points of interest and unlocking new areas of the huge Egyptian landmass.



III EGYPT

The largest playground to feature in an Assassin's Creed game, *Origins* takes place around 49BCE. It's a pivotal time in Egyptian history, the beginning of the end of ancient Egypt, the Pharaohs and the mysticism. A new world order begins here, with Cleopatra fighting to ascend her throne.



IV MYSTICISM

Origins will tap into the mysticism of the era, and it's going to do it without falling into the realms of fantasy. While the game is still grounded in historical reality, you should expect some instances where you'll come into contact with larger than life bosses while hallucinating, such as the giant serpent seen in the trailer.

While the ancient Egyptians may be one of the first great civilisations of humanity they were not without their brutality or sadism, as these wretched souls might well attest.

mysteries of ancient Egypt; eager to see what the *Black Flag* team could do as it swapped out gorgeous oceans for sweeping sandy planes? Perhaps.

Or it could indeed have something to do with game director Ashraf Ismail. He is one of the first Ubisoft employees to publicly acknowledge that cautious iteration was no longer enough for Assassin's Creed to survive, let alone thrive in the current gaming landscape. That has to count for something. The responses to *Black Flag* and *Unity* were polarising, to say the least, and that was more than enough to convince Ubisoft to give this team the time and space to take Assassin's Creed back to the drawing board – and nothing, it seems, is safe.

"We asked ourselves, 'can we create a true Assassin's Creed experience while still revamping it, modernising it, and bringing something new to it… refreshing it, if you will?" continues Ismail, noting that it wasn't just the details that his team focused on, but the fundamentals of Assassin's Creed's design too; whether features were in the game because they needed to be, or simply because the series' legacy demanded it. "We were open to the fact that the way players consumed the game is going to be different now, that we needed to make [large] changes to make the series modern, to take advantage of a lot of the tech that we are building.

"We've opened up all of the fundamentals of what being an Assassin's Creed game means, from the building of the world to all of the mechanisms within it… by the end of this experience, I want people to walk away saying 'wow, this was an Assassin's Creed game that needed to happen.'"

NEW BEGINNINGS

At a glance, it's difficult to pick apart the ways in which Assassin's Creed is being re-examined, particularly if you're looking at a video walkthrough. Merely seeing *Origins* in action doesn't do justice to what Ubisoft Montreal is trying to achieve here.

It may not, for example, be readily apparent that *Origins*' hero, Bayek, moves with a sense of purpose and fluidity unlike any other in his long lineage. That's a change fuelled, in part, by the fact that the run button has been removed; instead of having to press a button to enact a high-profile sprint, operating Bayek at his maximum movement speed is as easy as thrusting the analogue stick in a particular direction. The mini-map is gone, replaced by an Elder Scrolls style compass at the top of the screen to aid navigation, ensuring your attention is focused on the world itself rather than a litany of multi-coloured dots and icons in the bottom corner. Another small-but-important change sees Bayek able to scale almost every surface in the game; your ability to climb is no longer regulated by architectural design flaws, problem solving powered by intuition rather than vertical pathways carved out by precisely placed bricks and handrails.

While these are small quality of life changes, when you look at them within the wider context of what *Origins* is trying to achieve, you begin to get a sense that Ubisoft Montreal is wholly focused on putting control back into the hands of the players. The way Ismail tells it, his team wanted to address the criticisms that have come up time and time again with the series. The common frustrations and concerns surrounding combat, progression, navigation and mission design – each of which is being re-assessed and overhauled, with varying degrees of impact on the moment-to-moment action.

"There are a lot of fundamental differences with the gameplay this time. The combat is fundamentally different in terms of its depth and the way that we want players to think about it. This is deeply tied in with our new action-RPG elements, which are designed to change the way that people think about gameplay and progression," he says, adding, "beyond that, we have a lot of different types of objectives that are new, based on the fact that we have a new AI system, a new quest, and a new narrative structure."



The terrain and architecture of these regions offers up some unique challenges for the Assassin's Creed team that it hasn't had to address since the original game.

'We're going to need examples', we tell Ismail. After all, *Assassin's Creed III* made similar promises in regards to changing the complexity and fluidity of combat and exploration; the same is true of *Unity* in its promises to break away from traditional mission structures and progression cycles. Not only did both fail to do so, but they actually instilled – in a cruel twist of fate – the notion that Assassin's Creed was incapable of change, so entrenched in its ways that it would always struggle to deviate from the formula it solidified in 2009 with *Assassin's Creed II*.



> UBISOFT MONTREAL IS WHOLLY FOCUSED ON PUTTING CONTROL BACK INTO THE HANDS OF THE PLAYERS

Thankfully, Ismail is only too happy to oblige, giving us just a small (but potent) hint of how all of these new systems will intertwine to exorcise one of Assassin's Creed's biggest demons – the dreaded desync. "To give a very simple example, when you are doing some sort of chase or follow [objective] in previous Assassin's Creed games, you were always given this warning at about, say, 30-40 metres that your target is out of range and you are about to desynchronise – we hated this. We wanted to get away from that; there is no need or reason for that from a player experience point of view."

To facilitate this (frankly, wonderful) change, the studio had to completely rethink the way in which it approached its world design, not to mention how characters inhabited it and interacted with the player character within it. The result of this means that *Origins*' game space could be the most technically ambitious and outright impressive open world to come out of Ubisoft in recent years.

"We created a new AI framework that actually allows us to have thousands of persistent people living in this world," Ismail explains, noting that all of the AI – all of the human and animal NPCs that inhabit the sprawling Egyptian space – are "virtualised". That is to say, they function away from the immediate gaze of the player. "NPCs actually have a life out in the world," which, we're assured, will mean that players will no longer be forced into a reload if an objective goes awry. That's because *Origins* will generate new scenarios and gameplay opportunities as you move and interact with the environments and its inhabitants; it will react to your successes and failures in real-time, without punishing you for being creative or stumbling. "It means that all of those constraints are gone, completely gone. These were," he tells us, "frustrations that we wanted to remove."

EYES WIDE OPEN

Game makers dealing in open-world design have a habit of talking up their AI systems without explaining why they actually matter. It has been a common tactic for years; leverage the fact that NPCs have jobs, sleep cycles and bathroom routines as

shorthand for detailing how realistic a virtual world might be. Ismail tries a similar tactic, noting that "every living element of the game is a part of this new system" and that "because the AI lives in the world, all of a sudden it feels more alive. The NPCs feels more credible, like they belong there." It's a cute idea, but this tends to hide one simple truth: knowing that an NPC has a particular schedule is only useful knowledge should you want to loot or murder them; it's quickly forgotten once you have engaged in the moment-to-moment rhythm of play. Rarely does it have any practical impact on gameplay or the ways in which you can approach core mission objectives. And so we press on: what does any of this mean, practically, for you the player, looking to enjoy an Assassin's Creed experience?

"The point is this, we give this information to the player, that this AI is really living out in the world, doing whatever it is that they are doing, and as a player you get to make the choice of 'what kind of experience do I want to have?' When we ask you to do something in the game, the objective is now far more open ended… So yes, you do still have assassination targets but, technically, you can do whatever you want to get to your target.

"We have a target in the game who has decoys in one of the cities. You have to learn about him and his schedule. You actually have to pay attention to him, and the decoys – the ways they are living their lives – to figure out which one he really is, because the decoys are innocent people," we're told, though the open-ended play doesn't end there. "The gameplay experience can change, even as you're in the flow of chasing him down," Ismail teases, explaining that how you approach the target once you've figured this puzzle out can drastically change depending on a number of factors.

You can try and engage the target in open combat in the streets, only for them to escape on a chariot and make a break for a fortress. From there it means that your simple assassination attempt could transform into a multi-tiered stealth encounter as you try to sneak past gaggles of enemies of a far higher level than your own. Or you can get in a vehicle of your own and have a tussle on the sandy roads – vehicle combat, we're told, is much improved over *Syndicate*. Perhaps you can find another approach entirely.

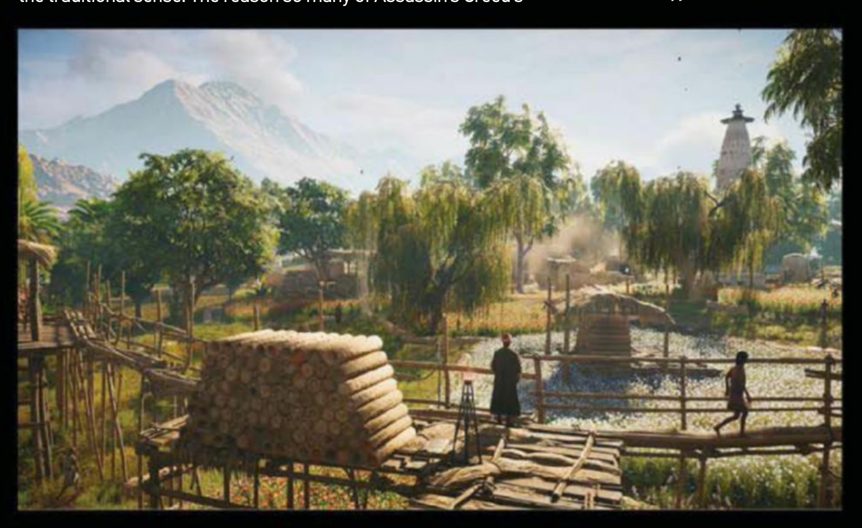
Another aspect to this more open-ended design is made possible because *Origins* doesn't feature missions, at least, not in the traditional sense. The reason so many of Assassin's Creed's objectives would end in frustration or a desync was because they were only (largely) ever designed to be played in one way – deviate from that and you'll be punished. But like we said, *Origins* is all about choice and control, and so this will be the first Assassin's Creed to feature a quest-based structure. "Players can now make a choice amongst a large variety of meaningful main and side quests that they can approach when and how they want," he says, promising that you'll be able to "pick up multiple quests, have them all be available simultaneously and decide their order and priority… most of the time you'll need to find the next step in your quest by yourself, as we provide as little guidance as possible."



While Bayek's journey starts as one of isolation this is ultimately supposed to be a story about the beginning of the Assassin order as we have come to know it.

> THE NEW SYSTEMS WILL INTERTWINE TO EXORCISE ONE OF ASSASSIN'S CREED'S BIGGEST DEMONS, THE DREADED DESYNC

Egypt is a pretty fantastic location to set a game because of its great diversity of landscapes. It's not all deserts and pyramids.



This is huge for Assassin's Creed. If Ubisoft Montreal can bring all of this together it will not only have a notable impact on the types of gameplay experiences it can offer on an hour by hour basis, but it should also introduce a level of consideration and experimentation to every action that we've never seen this series attempt. The introduction of quests will also bring a defter touch to storytelling, as *Origins* pulls focus – not only to the formation of the Brotherhood of Assassins – but to the stories that exist out in its wider world. "The big difference here is that missions, which is what we had before, only tell the beat of a story. A quest is, in effect, its own little story. It's packaged, you'll meet characters and, while you might have subsequent stories with those characters later, you can kind of wrap up a narrative each time. So we re-did our quest structure because there were just so many stories we wanted to tell," he says, adding, "A quest gives the narrative justification for meeting these people, dealing with them, or getting new information."

COMBAT EVOLVED

All of this would mean nothing if Ubisoft Montreal had ignored the most pressing complaint levied at Assassin's Creed over the years. For play to be so reactive, so open to interpretation, combat had to be entirely overhauled. The Counter-Attack prompt is gone, enemies no longer wait their turn to be decapitated, and the ability to button mash and glide competently between combatants has been removed entirely. Enemies will rush you – your response needs to be swift and precise, for death waits for no assassin. If you hadn't gathered already, *Origins* is embracing positioning, hit boxes, and the tenants of the Action-RPG design. We are already wondering how it ever survived without it.

The renewed combat system actually came out of the studio wanting to introduce boss battles into the Assassin's Creed pantheon of objectives, something it couldn't have done with the old system. "Early on, we decided that we wanted unique boss fights, where bosses have their own unique weapons and animations, where the player has to learn these enemies and how to fight against them. This was very difficult to do with the previous system, so effectively it has given us the leeway to have a lot of depth in our systems."

This October, you are going to need to throw out your AC muscle memory and get prepared to learn a whole new bunch of buttons. Attacks are now dished out with the Right Trigger and Right Bumper, X is now attributed to Dodge, while dedicated commands have been established to let you execute more robust defensive options. Left Trigger pulls up your shield, and those with a touch for timing will certainly find a lot of enjoyment in the introduction of a parrying system. This, as we've come to learn, works in tandem with a Destiny style loot-system, with multiple item slots attributed to every area of your character; a twisting skill tree, with three separate pathways for specialisation in combat, stealth and mysticism; an actual experience and levelling system, which governs which enemies you'll stand a chance of conquering, and a wide variety of weapon types and rarity tiers. »

Ubisoft is promising a very different flavour of combat for this game than we've seen before, enhanced further by a clear-cut levelling system.

As you can see there's no shortage of riches to be found on your adventures, but there are likely some very needy people out in the world who would benefit from your charity.



THE ART OF THE MATTER

Art director Raphael Lacoste talks us through the challenges of creating an authentic ancient Egypt and how his team overcame them

What challenges have you faced bringing ancient Egypt to life?
When we recreated ancient Egypt for *Assassin's Creed Origins*, we had to make some artistic choices, not only to have a credible sense of immersion, but also to take the player on a beautiful and epic journey. The constraints of having somehow less documentation than what we had for previous titles was, for us, a fantastic opportunity to be more creative. We did our homework and strived to be as historically accurate as possible of course, but we also had more freedom to recreate and re-imagine how this country looked and felt in ancient times.

We also wanted to do justice to the incredible diversity of ancient Egypt's landscapes and biomes. In *Assassin's Creed Origins*, you will embark on what we think is the most memorable journey in the franchise yet – from the lush oasis of Siwa to the harsh desert sands of the Qattara Depression, through the glorious and multicultural port of Alexandria and the ancient and majestic city of Memphis.

Was this the reason the mini-map has been removed, to ensure players spend more time exploring the world?
We took the decision to remove the mini-map very early on in the development process. Indeed, we wanted players to spend more time looking at and taking clues from the world itself rather than at a mini-map. This is a key lever in creating that feeling of exploration and discovery that we want our players to experience.

Visual artistry has always been a major pillar of the AC franchise and that's of course still true for *Assassin's Creed Origins*. In terms of our work in the Art Team, the removal of the mini-map makes the world's landmarks even more important as they help players to get a sense of their whereabouts, so we took even more care with those elements in *ACO* than we did in the previous titles.

Can you describe some of the technical ways your team has taken to recreating Egypt?
In *Assassin's Creed Origins*, we bring for the first time to our players a whole country to explore and discover. To achieve that we needed to work on new tools, allowing the team to design a vast scale landscape filled with life. We adapted and created new procedural tools to build our large forests and harvesting areas.

The massive open deserts of the game are not only sand dunes but also large cliffs and mountains. This is why we also relied on these new procedural tools to dress these landscapes with dry vegetations and rocks, touching by hand what needs to be to make each place feel unique.

The rendering has also been revamped for *Origins*. We reworked our lighting system with a new 'physically based lighting', allowing us to have a realistic time of day change with various atmospheres depending on the different regions of the game. We're very pleased with the outcome, we think it really makes the game more beautiful and immersive as it allows us to convey different moods and emotions.

THE ART OF WAR

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS FEATURES A REWORKED COMBAT SYSTEM, AND THESE ARE JUST SOME OF THE WAYS IT WILL TWIST AND TURN AS YOU APPROACH SITUATIONS OUT IN THE WORLD

MISSION STARTS HERE
FROM THE ROOFTOPS YOU SPOT YOUR TARGET. ARE YOU A HIGH ENOUGH LEVEL?

GRIND

LEVEL UP SOME MORE!

YES

NO

NO

TRY ANYWAY?

YES OF COURSE!

YOU'RE DEAD!
YOU AREN'T A HIGH ENOUGH LEVEL TO FIGHT THESE GUARDS. THEY DESTROY YOU WITH EASE. WE DID TRY TO WARN YOU...

SIDE-QUEST
ASSASSINATION TARGETS AREN'T THE ONLY DRAW, THERE ARE ALWAYS SIDE-QUESTS TO BE COMPLETED AND COLLECTIBLES TO BE FOUND OUT IN THE WORLD.

CAN'T BE ARSED!

HOW DO YOU WANT TO APPROACH THE TARGET?

LOUD

RUN!

THE TARGET SEES THE DANGER AND CALLS FOR HELP. BETTER FINISH THIS QUICKLY, YOU IDIOT.

STEALTH! WERE YOU SPOTTED?!

NO

KILL!
AFTER FOLLOWING YOUR TARGET INTO AN ALLEYWAY YOU LEAP FROM THE ROOFTOPS AND PLUNGE YOUR HIDDEN BLADE DEEPLY INTO THEIR CHEST.

YES

GIVE CHASE?

NO

SO POORLY SKILLED ARE YOU IN THE ART OF STEALTH, THAT THE TARGET SEES YOUR ASSASSINATION LEAP A MILE AWAY. HE SHRUGS YOU OFF WITH EASE, LAUGHING.

NO

ARE YOU SPEC'D IN STEALTH?

YES

KILL!
AFTER A DEADLY CHASE YOU FINALLY CATCH YOUR FOE. SOARING THROUGH THE AIR YOU LAUNCH YOUR HIDDEN BLADE INTO THE BACK OF HIS NECK.

YES

YES

LIAR!

DID YOU DESYNC?

WHAT IS THIS, *AC: UNITY*? OF COURSE NOT!

YOU ARE CATCHING UP! DO YOU HAVE ARROWS?

NO

YES

KILL!
WITH YOUR FOE IN SIGHT YOU LEAP INTO THE AIR. AS YOU DRAW YOUR BOW, TIME SLOWS AROUND YOU; YOU PLANT AN ARROW BETWEEN HIS EYES.

FIGHT! YOU PULL OUT A...

SPEAR

YOU'RE DEAD!
THE ALLEYWAY IS TOO NARROW. YOUR SPEAR CLASHES AGAINST THE WALL AS YOU SWING, WILDLY. THE TARGET KILLS YOU WITH EASE.

SWORD

THE ENEMY RUNS AT YOU. DO YOU...

COUNTER -ATTACK

OOPS!

YOU'RE DEAD!
THE COUNTER-ATTACK BUTTON PROMPT HAS BEEN REMOVED – YOU GET CUT DOWN. YOU REALLY SHOULD READ OUR FEATURE.

ATTACK

KILL!
CLOSING THE DISTANCE YOU ASSAULT THE TARGET WITH AN ARRAY OF HEAVY AND LIGHT ATTACKS, USING A COMBO TO DECAPITATE HIM.

DEFEND

CAN YOU PARRY?

LIKE IN DARK SOULS?

YOU'RE DEAD!
JUST BECAUSE A GAME HAS A PARRY OPTION DOESN'T MEAN IT IS 'LIKE DARK SOULS'. BESIDES, THERE IS NO STAMINA BAR. SO, YOU DIED.

YES

KILL!
PARRYING AN INCOMING ATTACK SENDS THE TARGET STUMBLING, YOU ROLL BEHIND HIM AND STRIKE FOR MAXIMUM DAMAGE!

NO

YOU'RE DEAD!
YOU PULL UP YOUR SHIELD, BUT HE BREAKS YOUR DEFENCE WITH EASE. COMBAT IN *ORIGINS* TAKES ACTUAL SKILL TO SURVIVE AND MASTER.



Each weapon in the game has a different bonus for your adrenaline meter, which in turn can be used to pull off big finishing moves if you charge it up enough in combat.

"Embracing the action-RPG has opened up the door for us to do all of these gameplay variations. All of these micro details that give the fights way more depth, which was the main intention as we changed the system fundamentally.

"From a granular detail point of view, you have to pay attention to your positioning, you have to pay attention to the enemy positioning. How many of them are there? What sort of weapon are you using – the distance, speed and type of your weapon," teases Ismail, giving some hint as to how integral and intertwined the new RPG systems are with play. "You have to start thinking about the real micro details of your combat situation, considering your loadout and your enemies. This level of depth is something that we've never had before; what it allows us to do is not only have more gameplay depth, in terms of the enemies and their behaviour, but also in the RPG elements. Because, all of a sudden, a poison-tipped spear is not the same as a spear that does bleeding damage or one that you can set on fire. We wanted it so that even if you're just playing with a spear, even after you've mastered the combos of the spear, that maybe you'll stumble across a legendary-tier item and it'll propose you to think about it all differently."

Ever since its debut in 2007, the Assassin's Creed games have become frictionless. Every aspect was made to be as simple – borderline automated – as it could possibly be. This extended out across all of its core proficiencies: combat, exploration, navigation and narration. But in *Origins* we see a different side to the series. *Origins* is all about establishing the Brotherhood Of Assassins, defining what it means to be an Assassin; that power fantasy has rough edges, and it's only through trying and failing, experimenting and growing, and, eventually, learning and conquering that you'll be able to truly rule over the shadows as a master assassin.

ROAD TO RELEASE

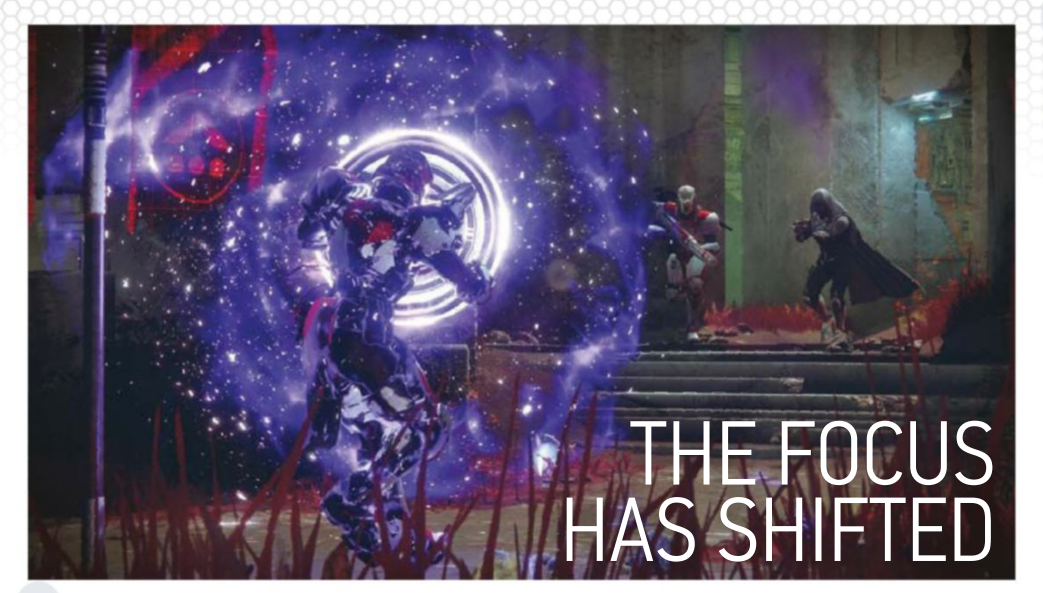
"I wouldn't say that, over time, our intentions have changed at all," considers Ismail as we ask whether the reception to *Unity* and *Syndicate* changed much for the team across development. "We had our intentions very early on and we stuck to them, but for sure we pay attention to the details. What are people not happy with? What are the things that the brand could do better? Where is the industry heading even, you know? More macro than just Assassin's Creed, but what are gamers looking for at this point and what can we deliver to give them a unique experience that is somehow genuine [to the franchise] but at the same time something they have never played before.

"That extra year of development (if you want to call it that) has been so that we could deliver the game that we set out to do almost four years ago. It's an exciting time to be here right now; we are getting down to the wire. We are seeing the game come to life, the result of all our hard work, and it surprises us still. We are going to deliver this thing… and I just hope you like what we've done with it."



15 WAYS DESTINY 2 IS CHANGING

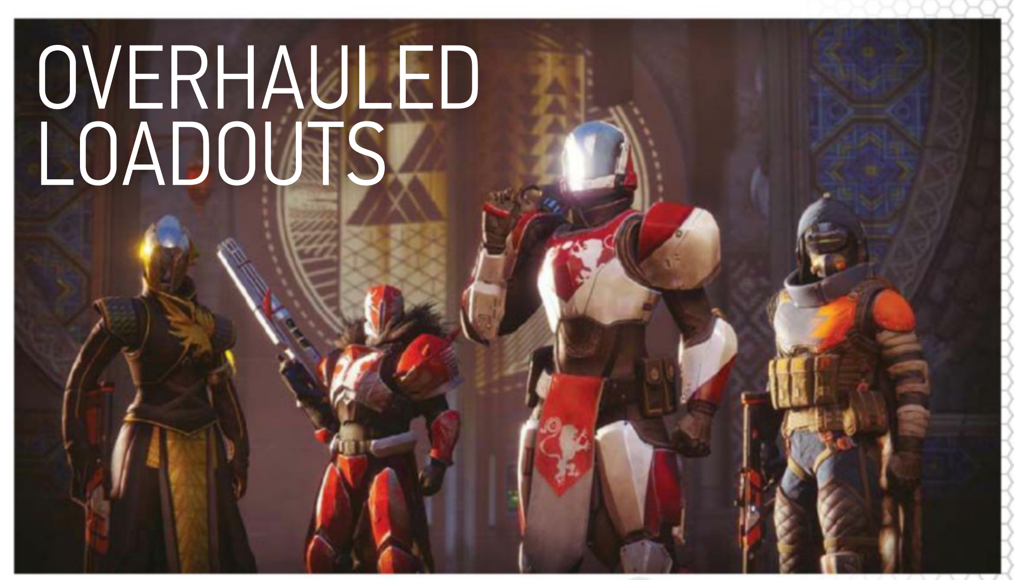
BUNGIE IS TAKING THE BIGGEST SHOOTER IN THE WORLD BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD, SO **GAMES™** GOES HANDS-ON ONCE AGAIN TO LOOK INTO DESTINY 2'S KEY ADJUSTMENTS



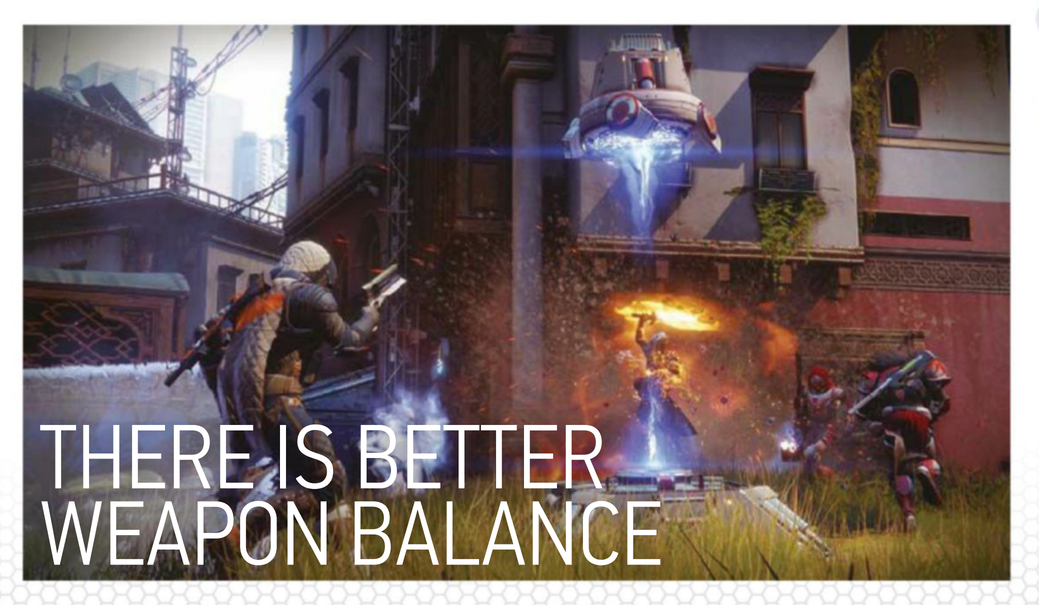
THE FOCUS HAS SHIFTED

01 *Destiny* is finally coming out of its protracted three-year beta – or, at least, that's how it's beginning to feel. Launching 6 September, *Destiny 2* is pitched as a new beginning, with Bungie taking aim at its loudest critics by placing a renewed focus on the core tenants of the shooter's design: narrative, exploration, cooperation and competition. Properly addressing long-standing criticisms and laying a solid foundation for future expansion has necessitated a shift to the state of play. Things are about to change and you aren't going to agree with every one of the decisions. Many of these are in service of supporting the overhauled PvP; so much of the Destiny experience is rooted around replaying the same maps and missions over, and so Bungie seems intent on ensuring that The Crucible can be a home for wayward Guardians looking for an experience that can challenge, change and reward during the long stretches between new content.

02 No doubt the biggest, and most contentious, change to *Destiny* 2 comes from the most unlikely of places: the overhauled weapon system. The balance was never quite right in the original iteration of *Destiny* – particularly when it came to The Crucible. Heavy weapons aggressively ruled over the battlegrounds and that system has been replaced here entirely as weapons such as the shotgun, sniper rifle, sword and rocket launcher now fall under a new Power Weapons banner: the super-charged weapons only usable once you claim scarce power weapon ammunition during play, governed by timers, death and spawn locations. This, as well as the Primary and Secondary weapon slots being recategorised into Kinetic and Energy has had a huge, and largely positive, impact on the state of weapon balance in PvP from what we've experienced.



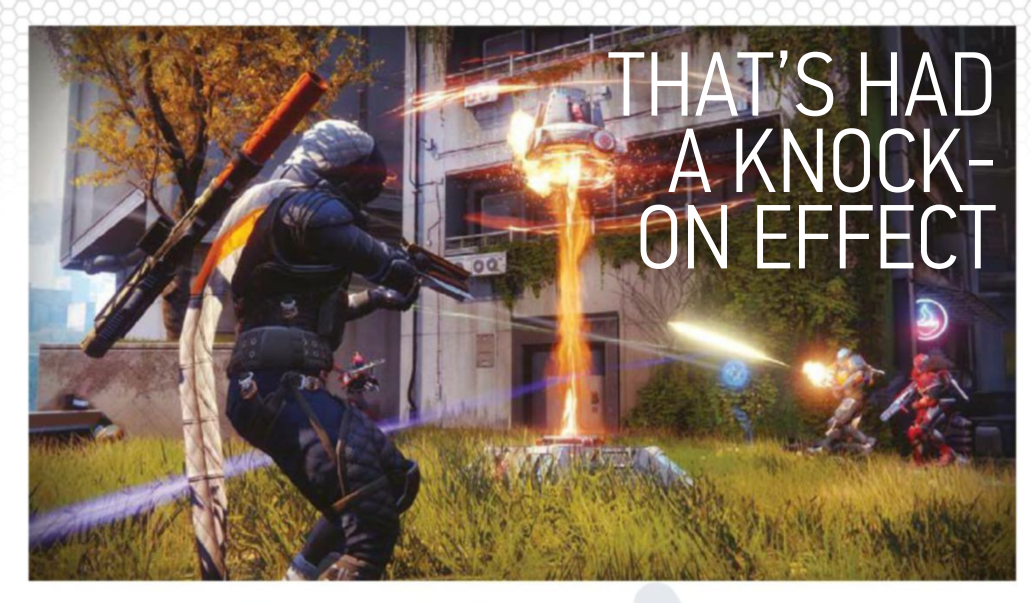
OVERHAULED LOADOUTS



THERE IS BETTER WEAPON BALANCE

03 Thanks to these changes, there's a greater focus on proficiency across a wider variety of firearms. Engaging in PvP combat feels far more dynamic, with players noticeably cycling between hand cannons and scout rifles, the new submachine gun and pulse rifle to better respond to each and every encounter as it occurs. There's a larger focus on honing your skill with a primary weapon, on understanding what weapon will best serve your survivability, and a larger emphasis on reading the map and positioning of enemy combatants. By making the most powerful weapons scarcely available in The Crucible, Bungie has taken the largest frustration out of play; the focus is no longer on one-shot weapons and rush-tactics, but rather the type of intense, skill-based play that made Halo's multiplayer so enjoyable. When you do eventually get access to your power weapon, it feels more meaningful, more empowering, than any situation The Crucible of old could have conjured artificially.

THAT'S HAD A KNOCK-ON EFFECT



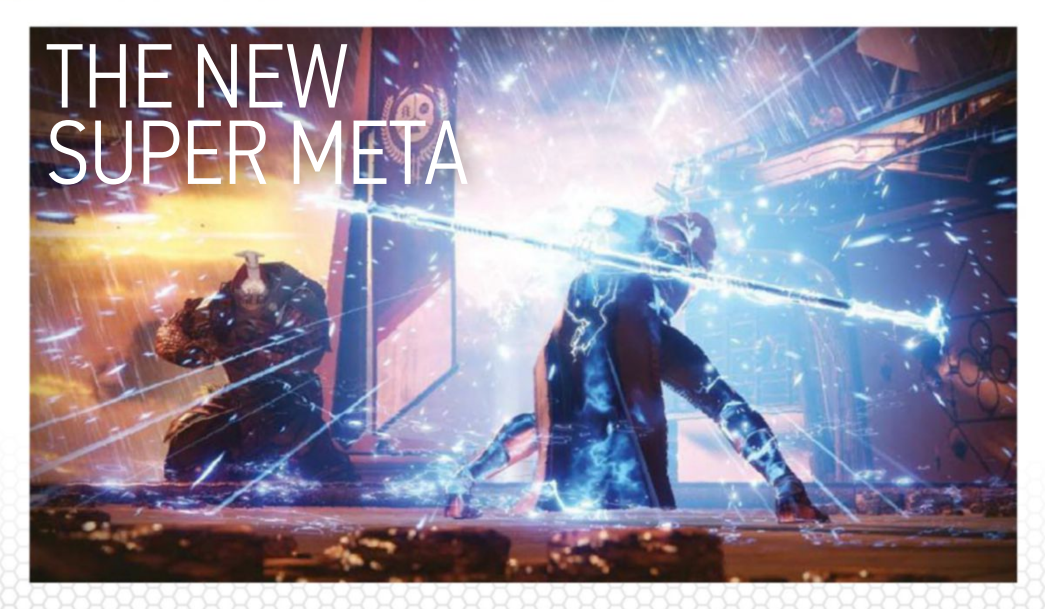
04 In fixing one of *Destiny*'s largest PvP grievances, Bungie has potentially created another, larger, problem that could have long-lasting consequences to the way in which we engage with the best content in *Destiny 2*. Namely, PvE feels actively less engaging because of the power weapon balance shift. While it's likely we'll see an abundance of ammo crates strewn across Strikes, and an increase in the drop rate of power ammo from enemy corpses in the final game, we're concerned that it won't be enough. The impact this has had on damage output is difficult to quantify, and chipping away at bullet-sponge enemies with two primary weapons – one modded to inflict elemental damage – seems at odds with *Destiny*'s core premise. When you can summon angel wings and reign death from above with space-magic, not being allowed to pull out your shotgun because you couldn't find the requisite ammo seems a little tenuous.

SPEAKING OF SUPERS...



05 Unpopular opinion time: the Supers ruined PvP in *Destiny*. In a competitive game mode designed to leverage skill, reflexes and active tactical comprehension, getting one-shot decimated by a screaming sociopath wielding a golden gun is not only out of place, it's outright destructive to any hope of having open, balanced play. *Destiny 2* changes the meta; it still gives you the opportunity to feel like an empowered interstellar war machine, it just takes a little longer to get there. The charge time has been extended, the impact of an Orb Of Light reduced. If you aren't getting kills there's a good chance you aren't going to pop your Super. Bungie also cleverly worked Supers into the UI design, subtly notifying you when someone has a Super burning a hole in their pocket via the colour of an icon below the score counter. It only serves to bring a new tactical edge, and renewed importance on communication, to play.

THE NEW SUPER META



06 In keeping with Bungie's decision to better communicate when a Super is ready to alter the dynamic of play, *Destiny 2* will also introduce better ways in which to combat those leveraging space magic to eviscerate enemies. While there is still little you'll be able to about a Voidwalker Warlock sending a Nova Bomb in your direction, it is now possible to mitigate 'roaming' Supers – those that rely on staying charged for short periods of time to utilise. Spot a Hunter Gunslinger with a Golden Gun and you'll find that an effective counterplay now exists thanks to the second slot energy weapons – dealing bonus damage in Crucible to any player with an active Super. Plus, you no longer need to worry about matching the Arc, Solar and Void elements to get a bonus, giving each and every player a chance against PvP's most powerful aggressors, no matter your loadout configuration.



07 With Supers charging far slower in PvP, we had expected to see the damage potential of abilities be raised across the board. That, surprisingly, isn't the case; grenades were an overused blight in *Destiny's* Crucible and Bungie has responded by overcorrecting. In both PvP and PvE, cooldowns take an absolute age to recharge and it's a little disappointing to see in both instances. Strangely, a large array of the subclasses offer skills which help increase recharge speeds of melee abilities – helping to close the distance between battling players – but there is no equivalent for grenades, unless, of course, grenade recharge speed is something Bungie is actively holding back for armour mods and exotic gear in the final game. Either way, while this has had a largely positive impact on ability spamming in PvP, the knock on effect is that it's yet another contributing factor to making Guardians feel underpowered in PvE.



GOODBYE TO ABILITY SPAM



BULLET SPONGE BOSSES

08 Many of the larger changes in *Destiny 2* have had a positive impact on the playability of PvP, but they are raising a number of concerns for PvE. Given that Bungie is yet to reveal the first Raid, show off more than a glimpse of Patrol, and has only given us access to one Strike, The Inverted Spire, we are going to speculate on this one; we are concerned that by making Power Weapons scarcely available, by slowing down the recharge rate on grenades and Supers, it's led to Guardians feeling less powerful – a problem when it comes to Destiny's notoriously long, bullet-sponge boss fights. The magic of a good boss fight in *Destiny* is seeing three hyper-powerful Guardians come together to wield a vast array of impressive, visually stunning powers and abilities. By slowing this, *Destiny 2* runs the risk of losing its dynamic, spectacular edge in favour of the grind.

09 Destiny is all about empowerment – pitting you against impossible odds and huge waves of enemies in an attempt to maintain challenge as you continue to get better weapons, armour and mods. It was player movement that made navigating the biggest encounters possible – that gave the Raids an edge, as platforming challenges intertwined dutifully with shooting galleries – yet it has been massively reigned in for the sequel. Closing gaps is more difficult, there's less forward momentum when you take to the skies, and a lack of mobility across the three classes, making the Hunter class feel redundant. Guardians feel heavier, in general, with a larger emphasis placed on cautious airborne movement and cover positioning. Right now, it feels as if Mobility stats are largely redundant, something we hope will be addressed ahead of launch as Bungie continues to tweak loot, levelling and modifications.



PLAYER MOVEMENT IS DIFFERENT





NETCODE CONCERNS

10 Despite the huge focus on PvP content in *Destiny 2*, it was difficult to understand the studio's decision not to bring dedicated servers to the fray. Bungie has promised that it has overhauled its peer-to-peer netcode, and while performance is – for the most part – solid, we've still had instances of interruption and disconnection; survivability can be hard enough in Crucible, the last thing we want to contend with is teleporting Guardians (and not those of the Warlock persuasion). How the netcode holds up, particularly on PC, with millions of incoming players at launch, is a concern. It's a shame, especially as the core-gunplay is a polished and responsive as ever. Bungie still makes the best feeling shooters in the business, but we'll continue to have concerns over the netcode until proven otherwise – the respawn points, following a disconnection in beta, in the campaign and Strikes were a nightmare to recover from.



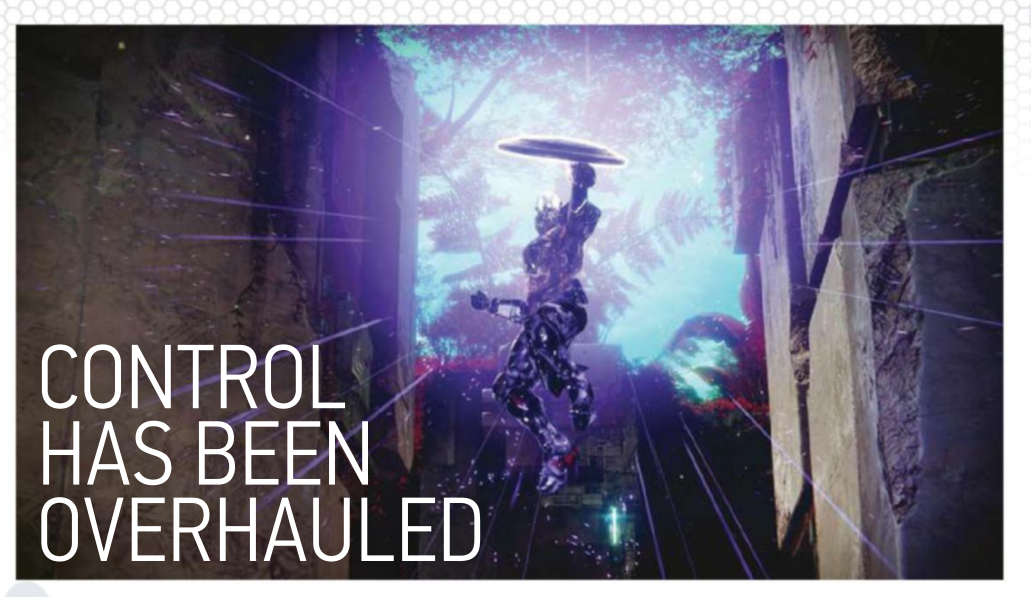
THE CRUCIBLE PLAYER-COUNT

11 As fun as The Crucible was back in *Destiny*, the six versus six format was far too chaotic. It was difficult to follow the action and tough to react to the shifting state of play, with games routinely resulting in messy firefights around spawn points and frustrating results for everybody involved. Bungie has responded by reducing team sizes down: the standard PvP configuration changed to four versus four, a move that seems universally positive. There's a far larger emphasis on maintaining specific, tactical roles – in working with your team to utilise clear offensive and defensive plays. Interestingly (and whether this speaks to this change specifically or the general re-balance is up for debate) individual players feel far more defined and impactful, with solid tactical manoeuvres and plays having a noticeable impact on the outcome of games, flow of combat and positioning of everybody else on the map.



MAP DESIGN IS BETTER

12 With less players running around, it's given Bungie space to let the maps breathe in *Destiny 2*. The two Crucible maps we've seen so far are noticeably re-focussed, less cluttered and cramped than their counterparts from the original *Destiny* – easier to navigate and learn than anything in the original game. Spawn killing seems to be a thing of the past, as does getting decimated from unseen aggressors. If the Endless Vale and Last City Midtown maps are a fair representation of what will be available at launch, then we should expect The Crucible to be a far more intimate affair across the board. Learning the maps, clearly defined in their sightlines and pathways, is imperative should you want to avoid chokepoints, charge your Super and have a noticeable impact on games.



CONTROL HAS BEEN OVERHAULED

13 If Control is indicative of how Bungie plans on adapting our favourite PvP modes for the new weapon balance, cleaner map design and reduced player counts, then we are in for some seriously good times. Control has been completely streamlined, focused on getting players in motion and in battles. Point A and C begin captured, funnelling players towards B within seconds of spawning; points no longer capture faster if multiple people are standing on the flag, which has given the multi-person battles over these areas a more dynamic feel and dangerous edge, movement is key to surviving these situations. Couple these changes with a power play being activated should you capture all points – boosting the amount of points you are awarded per kill – and match time locked to eight minutes, and you'll find a game mode that is sleeker and more aggressive than its original iteration.



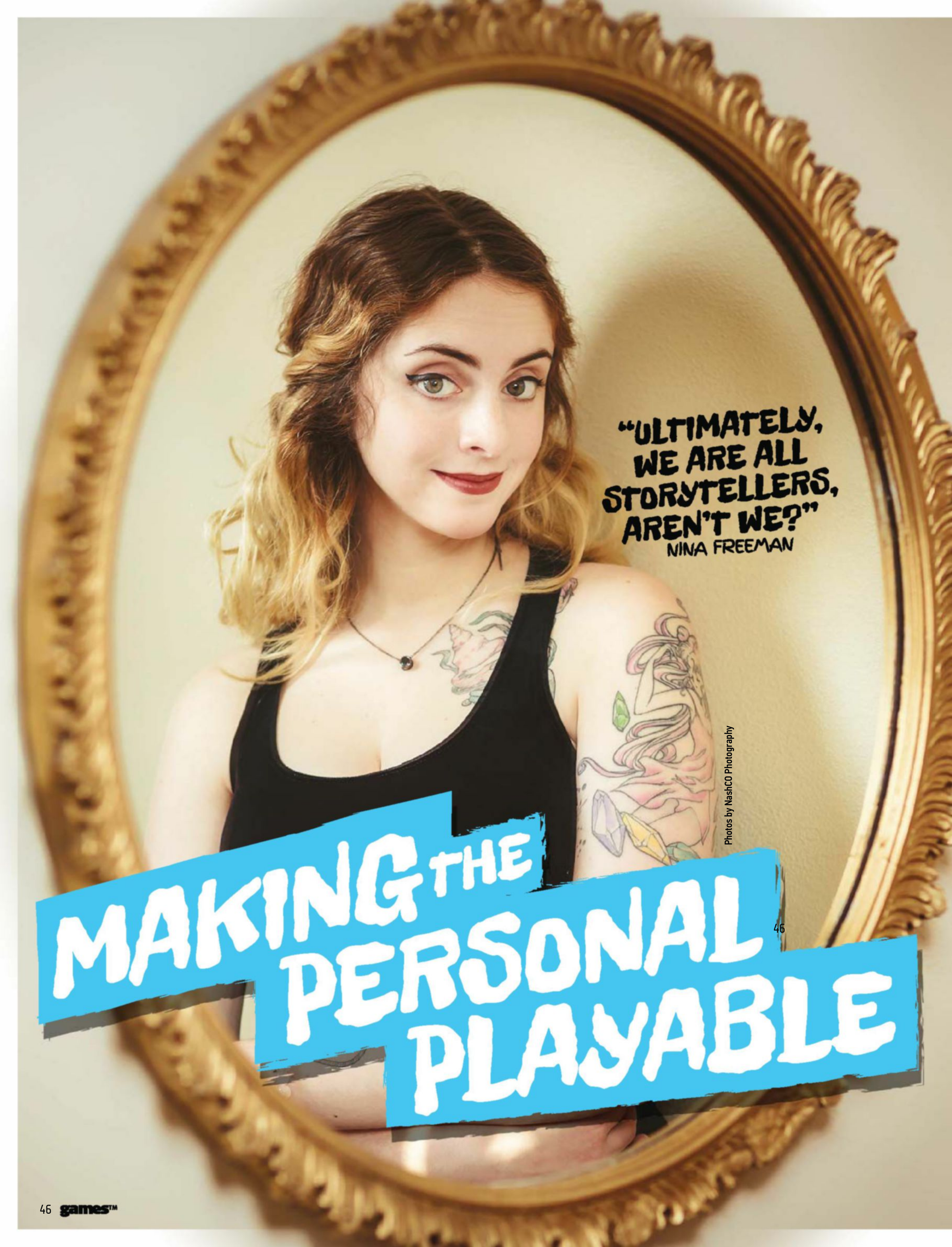
STRONGER FOCUS ON TEAMWORK

14 If any one thing is clear – and this applies to both PvE and PvP – it's that *Destiny 2* around the premise of players being in constant communication and willing to work as a team, more so than its predecessor. The tighter games of The Crucible certainly require teams to avoid lingering frustrations, while the challenges and spectacle seen in the Inverted Spire Strike essentially demand it. Solo play in *Destiny 2* doesn't feel as viable, although this will hopefully be addressed by the addition of Guided Games and the robust Clan system that's designed to bring players together matchmaking – we're still yet to see this in action, a slight concern given the game's imminent release date. Still, Bungie recognises how important these systems are, and we're eager to see how they contribute to Destiny's stellar community.



THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE

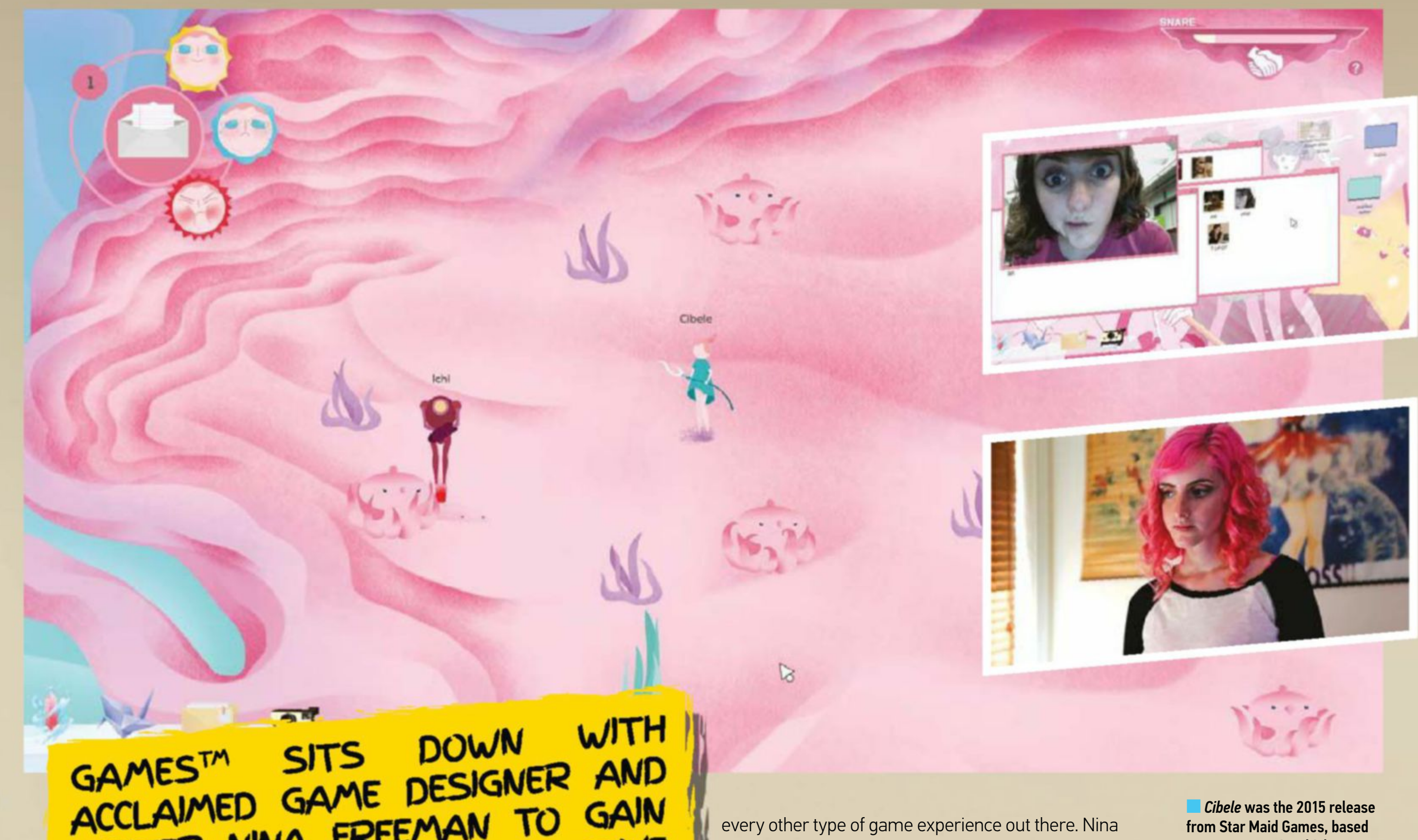
15 With the Tower under siege, the Guardians have had to find a new home to play football and dance around in. In *Destiny 2* it'll be The Farm, and it's the place to take a rest when you're done savaging people in PvP and arguing over revivals in PvE. The Farm looks to be a pretty great social space; our limited exposure to it has revealed a far more complex space than the Tower, with, seemingly, far more to do and see. With The Farm holding up to 12 Guardians – an increase on the Tower's 6 – there's far more activity, which also means far more emote spam. Still, as a place to relax, get your mail, pick up dailies and exchange items for loot, it's without question Bungie's best yet.



MAKING THE PERSONAL PLAYABLE

"ULTIMATELY, WE ARE ALL STORYTELLERS, AREN'T WE?"
NINA FREEMAN

Photos by NashCO Photography



GAMES™ SITS DOWN WITH ACCLAIMED GAME DESIGNER AND WRITER NINA FREEMAN TO GAIN AN INSIGHT INTO HER CREATIVE PROCESS, REFLECT ON HER PAST, AND LOOK TO THE FUTURE

"*CIBELE* AND *HOW DO YOU DO IT?* HAVE CAUSED ME TO REFLECT ON THE RAMPANT SHAMING OF PEOPLE WHO MAKE GAMES THAT ARE 'CONFESSIONAL' OR WHO ARE SEEN TO BE 'OVER SHARING' WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT THINGS THAT ARE CONSIDERED PRIVATE, LIKE SEX," SAID GAME CREATOR NINA FREEMAN, SPEAKING DURING A PANEL AT GDC IN 2015.

It was a moment that, in many respects, thrust the young artist's voice onto the global stage, as she delivered a message that was as empowering as it was important – as relevant today as it was in then. "This stigma against honesty makes it hard to share straightforward autobiographical games; it's scary, being publicly shamed is not fun. However, I'm not going to stop making games about my own life experience. You can slut-shame me, you can call me an attention whore, and you can call me desperate; I don't care. I'll make games about my personal life because I want to. Games can and should be about anything."

This is a moment that we have often found ourselves returning to and reflecting upon over the years. It felt like a call to arms for a new generation of game makers. Those inspired by the experimental works that were arriving on the scene, compelled to take it a step further and release work that could transform the medium into a place where games that offered honest reflection, societal criticism and personal anecdotes could be embraced – taken as seriously as every other type of game experience out there. Nina Freeman is the punk poet of the games industry; her work has proven to be as engaging as it is disruptive, and through it all she has made the personal playable.

Cibele was the 2015 release from Star Maid Games, based on a true story in which you play as a 19-year old girl who has become intimate with a young man she has met in an online game.

To her fans, Nina Freeman is proof that bold, independent, artistic videogames can be created in an industry that has had a tendency to disavow anything but violence. To development outfits like The Fullbright Company – the studio renowned for exploring the curiosities of the human condition with titles such as *Gone Home*, where Nina now works as a level designer on *Tacoma* – she's part of the new wave of digital auteurs. To a minority, she's considered a fraud, *that girl* who found success making videogames about her sex life on the Internet. But as she has said time and time again, games can and should be about anything.

"'Write what you know'. That was something I was taught and value a lot as a writer. My interests as a writer ultimately lies in ordinary life stories because I know ordinary life – or at least I know *my* ordinary life," she tells us. "A lot of my focus has been on relationships, sex and love because they are all *really* ordinary parts of life but in art have been made extraordinary in a lot of cases.

"But life can be messy and imperfect. I like exploring how people can have a lot of problems and what that means for them, I like how a story can just be about that. How someone messed up – because we all mess up all of the time. It's scary to admit that things can fail, or that they can be complicated, or that maybe romance isn't actually romantic in the way that we traditionally expect it to be… I find it interesting."

Freeman's games, 16 of them in the last four years and each largely focused around honest autobiography, have made Freeman one of the most talked about developers of her generation. And yet she's still one



Nina Freeman is a co-founder of the Code Liberation Foundation, an educational outreach where anybody that identifies as a woman can look to learn programming and design techniques from other women.

of those rare creatives whose body of work is able to speak for itself. In these games – short vignettes, as she would call them – you often play as Nina, or, at least, a reflection of her, the story rooted somewhere in reality. This includes works such as *Hokuto No Huchen (Fist Of The North Karp*), based around a fishing trip with her father; *Ladylike*, which chronicles a series of trips to the mall with her disapproving mother; *How Do You Do It?*, in which we relive a childhood memory of smashing naked Barbie dolls together in the hopes of figuring out how sex works, an insight into the innocence of a young 12-year old girl that had been left confused by the infamous steamy car scene in the film *Titanic.*

Then there are her two most powerful works, *Freshman Year,* an unsettling exploration of a sexual assault from her college years; and *Cibele*, a game that unbashfully explores the nature of intimacy and sexual expression in online relationships – from the servers of an online MMO to an awkward bedroom fumble, *Cibele* doesn't pull any punches in its voyeuristic retelling of Freeman's 19-year old life experiences.

All of these intimate, narrative-driven videogames are linked by an empowering energy and emotional pressure, by themes that reflect the mess and intrigue of daily life, using heartbreak and exploration of the self as the road to a better understanding. These games work, not merely because they are meticulously built, but because they are able to crack through social boundaries, because they are *real* – written with a clear sense of purpose and identity. They often act as a window into what is, for many of us, a different world entirely.

While they can have a tendency to be a stark and genuine reflection of Freeman's inner demons and desires, there's also purity to it all; a piece of each of us in each of them – we are but human after all. "I think that drawing on the small casual things we all tell each other about is pretty inspiring… I draw a lot of inspiration from casual conversation. I love listening to other people's stories, it could just literally be at the bar; if someone references something weird that happened to them, I'm always the person that will be like 'tell me more, *actually* tell me the story; the *real* story'.

"Ultimately," she considers, lingering on the thought for just a moment, "we are all storytellers, aren't we?"

Freeman wasn't meant to become a game designer. She drifted through New York doing a bit of writing, pursuing a fading interest in theatre. She went to undergraduate college looking for answers, losing sight of the questions. Instead she found a mentor in Charles North, a second-generation New York school poet, who would inspire Freeman and help her see and think about the world in a different way. "This period of my life was really where I learned how to write and learned what I was interested in as a writer – ordinary life stories and vignettes, which, funnily enough, is what I'm interested in doing in games," she says, smiling. "What I learned from Charles North was that it's very powerful to write what you know and that you can really grasp something very honest and very genuine when you do. I really took that to heart."

It was during these years that she "met a group of game makers who invited me in to do game jams with them," she says, noting that she "kind of just fell into it all and found the similarities between our worlds as I went. I made that my way to fit into that world". It was their enthusiasm that would push Freeman to explore the booming indie market and mark her first attempts to bridge the gap between interactive entertainment and reflective poetry. "I think a lot of them were into my ideas because they were a little bit different to what they were doing. That went well for me," she says, laughing once again, her enthusiasm infectious.

"I remember being introduced to *Gone Home*, *Dys4ia*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, and *Cart Life* around this time. In those games I saw the type of writing that I enjoyed reading and creating in the poetry world. So I was like, 'OK, I love videogames and I now understand that there is this commonality between my work and the work of these game makers'. I found a bunch of collaborators that were awesome who, luckily, wanted to explore these ideas with me."

But never did she think that making them for a living was an option. "I didn't really think I would be able to get a job in the industry, because I didn't think that what I was making would fit into what other people in the workforce were making," she says, laughing. Instead she poured everything into studying poetry, the writings of Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and Elizabeth Bishop. The roots of Freeman's voice and work can be found here. "Much of their work is very much about putting something honest out there, that people can engage with. So, for me, I became comfortable with sharing my stories in that way – whether they are about a person or just stories about intimate things, because I am inspired by that body of work. Poetry taught me to care about small stories, so that became a passion of mine."

This would be something she would develop into her earliest works. *My House My Rules* in which you play as a young Nina trying to hide snacks around the house from her strict mother; *Mangia*, a text adventure documenting Nina's experience being diagnosed with a chronic illness, (one that gave her the time she needed to learn to program she will say, reflectively); and her first interactive experience, *A Dating Sim*, that explored the nature of consent, conversation and friendship in nightlife culture. These games are seen to convey a message too disruptive and unconventional for some corners of the Internet; too concerned with the self to be worth thinking about or paying attention to. That's something Freeman found strange as she intertwined her knowledge of poetry with her love of games.

"In the poetry world that's more of a thing, to be more open and personal. In games it is way more controversial. It's been interesting to come from a place



An installation was created for *Lost Memories Dot Net* in the heart of Manchester, giving you an insight into what the world outside of the screen may have looked like. An insight into the world of a 14-year old Nina Freeman.



WORKING ON TACOMA

AN OPPORTUNITY TO STEP AWAY FROM HERSELF AND DEVELOP HER CRAFT

"With *Tacoma*, what's been so exciting for me is that sometimes I pigeonhole myself into being the 'personal games person' – and yes, that is definitely something I'm into and something I want to do more of all of the time – but ultimately game design is the craft that I want to improve on," says Freeman, reflecting on her time with The Fullbright Company thus far as a level designer. "With *Tacoma* it gave me the freedom to stop thinking about my personal work, to see different perspectives of how games are made and to learn from that."

Freeman's work is heavily inspired by *Gone Home*. It was, in fact, a chance encounter with studio co-founders Steve Gaynor and Karla Zimonja, as she looked for feedback for *Cibele*, that took her from working in the independent circuit, under the banner Star Maid Games, and into working on something much larger than anything she had attempted before. "They liked the kind of storytelling I was doing. I didn't have the technical [knowledge] to do what I'm doing with them now; I learned everything on the job! But from early conversations it was clear that our ideas of what kinds of stories games can tell and our interests in environmental storytelling lined up really well."

"Being able to come in with that common ground and then have them as mentors to teach me how to make games on this larger scale has been an insanely, lucky, amazing learning experience for me," she says, her enthusiasm for the game's imminent launch palpable. "For *Tacoma*, I was able to be the person who was doing a lot of the early paper maps and level layouts… there are parts of the game that I can point to and say, 'that came from me'! And that's pretty powerful. It's a transformative experience!"

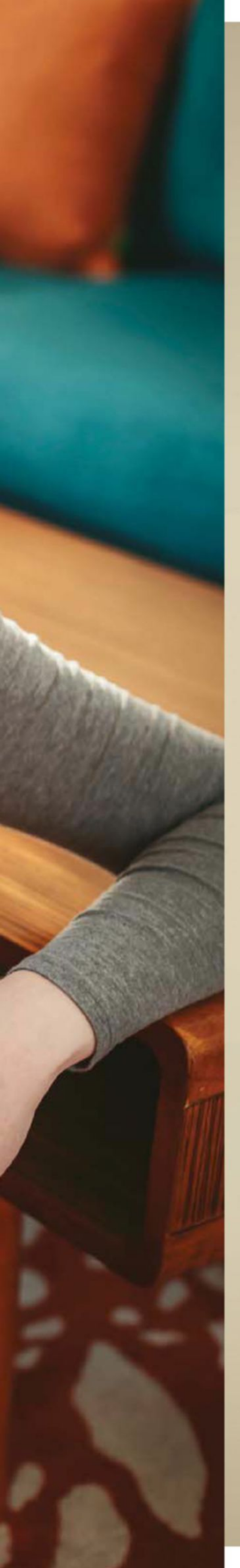


Ladylike is one of Freeman's games that examines childhood, in this instance various trips to the mall with your mother. Every dialogue branch is met with disapproval.

In *Freshman Year* you embody a college freshman at a campus party. It's a difficult and important work addressing sexual harassment.

How Do You Do It? puts players into the role of an 11-year old girl who is just discovering the idea of sex, using her dolls as she attempts to figure out how it works.

"I DIDN'T REALLY THINK I WOULD BE ABLE TO GET A JOB IN THE INDUSTRY"
NINA FREEMAN



where that was encouraged and something that I was always around to a world where it is less common."

It's difficult to understand why exactly the games industry can be like this, so confrontational to anything brave enough to be different. We discuss it for some time, the controversies that have arisen over sex in games, the furore around any release that is daring enough to include some form of artificial relationship or sexual encounters. We laugh about a situation in which we were chastised by passengers on a train for playing *Cibele* – the sometimes-steamy FMV sequences apparently too much for some fragile British sensibilities. But this, she considers, is what happens when ordinary people are asked to consider and confront the nature of sexuality outside of the bedroom.

"One of the questions I get asked the most often is: 'sex is such a controversial topic in games, why do you address it?' I think part of it, for me, is that I grew up in an environment where talking about sex was just not allowed with my family. I never had a sex talk – even to the point where having a period was not explained to me until it happened. I thought that maybe my upbringing could have been an extreme, but I actually think it's pretty common for families of my generation to have been like that," considers the 27-year old creative. "When I grew up and started making art and games, sex was something that I always had a lot of anxiety about discussing. So I started incorporating [sex and intimacy] into my work as a way of sort of learning how to talk about it, because I had always wanted to talk about it… after all, we want to talk about the things you aren't allowed to talk about, right?"

This, Freeman concludes, isn't just about sex, but part of a wider problem regarding self-expression and open dialogue in the world. It should be a theme, a natural part of life, that videogames are as open to tackling as they are aggression and violence. But then there is, as she has said in the past, a stigma against honesty. "Maybe [it is] selfish of me, but ultimately I'm creating work that I want to engage with and that I can use to express myself. I want to use my work to be able to talk about things that would be difficult for me to talk about otherwise. It's good, because I feel like I've been able to have a more open dialogue about sex stuff in my personal life [now], and in a culture where you just aren't supposed to talk about yourself," she says, clarifying, "that's not even just about sex, not *at all*. Talking about one's [own] life is perceived as something that is personal, or deemed inappropriate. I find the issue of those social boundaries to be pretty interesting."

This curiosity has fuelled much of Freeman's output, but it isn't designed to necessarily challenge or change people's perceptions of what is and isn't deemed appropriate. Nina is simply doing what she is trained to do, write poetry – she just so happens to express her thoughts and feelings in frames now, rather than clauses.

"This came up a lot when I released *Freshman Year,* which is about a sexual assault. Something I got asked a lot was 'is this an advocacy statement?' Well yes, in a sense. I think sexual assault is bad, and obviously that comes out in the game because it's a belief I have – I think that our beliefs are going to come out in our art, no matter what we do," she says, but that wasn't the driving force behind her decision to make the game. Instead, it was something far simpler. "I do want to speak about those issues, but for me, as a game designer, that was just a personal expression of a story that stuck out in my mind as interesting… it was an interesting way for me to experiment with player-character embodiment – the things that I'm interested in as a game designer."



A commission from the Manchester International Festival, ***Lost Memories Dot Net*** is an accurate representation of life as a teenager back in 2004. Enthusiast blogs, chat rooms and love triangles; it's a nostalgia trip.

"When I was first making games, I was doing a lot of it because it was cathartic or because I was still learning. But then, as I started to develop more of a voice as a game designer, and began realising that this was a craft and that I was really dedicating myself to it, it became more about… I recognise the kinds of stories that resonate with people, that get people engaged and talking, and I like to use them to explore the more craftsmanship and technical part of game design. Because I really am thinking about it as an art and not as if I'm trying to teach people about anything; I just want to tell stories."

These are stories that many in the development community, let alone the wider industry, would find difficult to tell. There would be a hesitance, of not only putting themselves out there on such public display, but of the self reflection that such a research, writing and design process would necessitate. But we get the impression that Nina isn't all that worried by what her games might reveal of her own personality to the world. It is, after all, part of being an artist.

"When I work on games that draw on my own life, I am always really deliberate about maintaining critical distance from the moment I'm looking back on. This is so that I can look at myself in my personal stories as more of a character than as myself. I'm primarily interested in writing an honest depiction of the character based on myself – always surfacing flaws, [the] good things and the bad things. I don't want to sugar coat anything, even when the work is based on my own life. I think honest, human stories are the most interesting, so I strive to always capture that kind of genuine feeling, [a] character who is imperfect, even when it's based on myself."

What's important now is that these types of games can move "beyond the enthusiast community and be part of a more global cultural conversation. I'm sure every medium has gone through this phase, right; every medium goes through its teenage phase, but now there is more work being produced and at a faster right by more people, by more diverse people, and games have been going through that for a while now. But we are finally starting to see the results of it… it's more a part of the games landscape as a medium than ever, it has found a legitimate place within it".



HOUSE OF FLYING COMBOS

ABSOLVER

AS SLOCLAP'S FIRST GAME IS ABOUT TO SHIP, WE VISITED THE PARISIAN STUDIO TO FIND OUT WHY THAT'S SO IMPORTANT, AND WHY EVERY FIGHTING GAME PLAYER SHOULD BE PAYING ATTENTION

"It's fucking hard making a game," says Pierre Tarno, creative director at SloClap. He pours himself another beer from the keg that he's put between us, offers us a cup, and carries on. "It consumes your days and nights and you think about it all the time… but if you don't have an attachment to your game, and that deep belief that it's awesome and it's a game that *should* be made then you'll burn out, and not have that passion and fuel anymore."

Tarno, and a lot of his colleagues at SloClap, are alumni of Ubisoft Paris, where many of the staff in the small Parisian studio cut their teeth on the *Tom Clancy, Watch Dogs* and *Just Dance* franchises. It was their pedigree and broad development experience that led Devolver Digital to their doorstep – the notorious publisher behind the likes of *Hotline Miami, Reigns* and *Luftrausers*. According to a little production myth we picked up at the studio, a much smaller version of SloClap approached Devolver in 2015 with an alpha, a trailer and some artwork, and it was enough to convince the publisher to sign the studio up on the spot. Devolver knew it had something special with *Absolver* from day one.

"[Working in an independent studio], we get to define the vision that's dear to us, that we think is original enough and beautiful enough to be presented to players… that gives meaning to our effort. So that's wonderful. When I left Ubisoft, I was working on *Ghost Recon Wildlands*. It wasn't even the final push on production, and I was working in a team with 250 people. Here, at the final apex of production, there are 25 of us. Working with a smaller team like this gives us much greater velocity – when we were really motoring with production, it gave us this breakneck speed, this ability to not look back, iterating and making the game as good as it could be without having to have meeting after meeting and wrestling with this huge codebase at every turn." He smiles, leans in closer. "But making games is still fucking hard."

It seems making *Absolver* is almost as hard as playing it: it's a tough game, one that tests everything you think you know about fighting games and action-RPGs in a system that's pretty unlike anything we've seen before. On the way into the SloClap office, we clocked a very small selection of games: *Tekken 5, Dark Souls, God Hand, Way of the Samurai 3, Uncharted 4* and *Kengo: Master of Bushido.* These games form the DNA helix of what *Absolver* is – the environmental impact of Uncharted, the impression of the battle system of *God Hand*, the 3D setup of *Tekken 5*… *Absolver* is a mongrel game, but like most mongrels, it's got so much more personality than its parent breeds.

The idea for the game is a bit of a strange one: it's a co-op brawler, but built in a 3D



fighting engine, with elements of asynchronous multiplayer and exploration filtered in, too. You're tasked with traveling this gorgeous, watercolour-esque landscape, defeating opponents and learning combat disciplines to find out where you belong in an empire long collapsed and seemingly forgotten. Partners can come and go, and they may help or hinder depending on their personality, but you'll never know their true intentions until they act.

"We loved *Journey*," Aurélien Topia, programming lead, tells us when we asked where *Absolver*'s mix-and-match genre came from. "When I first played *Journey*, I was certain I was playing with AI. At the end, when the credits run, I saw the names of the people I played with and I realised it was genius… these AI weren't perfect. They could misdirect you, they could miss things. We liked that a lot for *Absolver*, you know – we felt like we could bet on human nature, and there's a lot of potential in that."

In *Absolver*, other players that are online can show up at any time in your game – like *Journey*, they can choose to help you: show you something cool they've found, take you to a loot drop, make things easier for you. But SloClap has intentionally left friendly fire on at all times – if they just want to attack you, they can. If you want to team up with them to take out a group of enemy fighters, you can; but if you accidentally keep hitting them during the fight and want to finish them off afterwards, there's nothing stopping you. In many ways, it gives you the power fantasy of being in your own old-school Kung Fu film, deciding to kill your mentor or stab an old friend in the back becomes an obvious, easy-to-achieve goal – if you're good enough at the game, that is.

"When we're testing the game here, in the studio, it's hard to gauge what the community outside SloClap is going to be like… because in testing here, everyone just wants to troll

> "WHEN YOU FIGHT SOMEONE IN PVP IN ABSOLVER, IT'S TOTALLY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER FIGHTING GAMES,"
> PIERRE TARNO, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, SLOCLAP

everyone," Topia laughs. "But in the beta and alpha, our feedback was very clear: there was a lot of cooperation, and that makes us very excited for the game's general release."

A lot of the game revolves around co-op – especially *Absolver*'s post-game content. Once you're done with the main story, you'll have the opportunity to set up your own dojo. The game's fighting mechanics revolve around what the studio calls Combat Decks – card decks that you can totally customise and build yourself from the ground up. Each deck that each player has will be totally unique: there are four stances in



DEDICATED FOLLOWERS OF FASHION

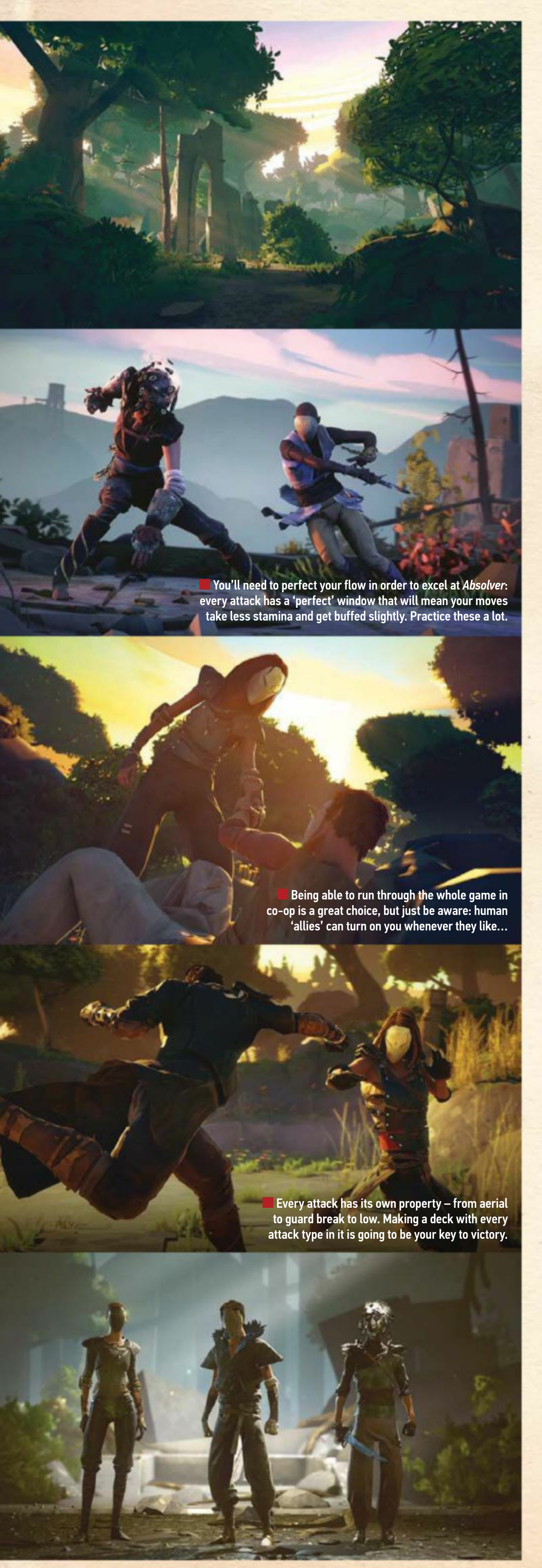
HOW YOU LOOK IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS HOW YOU FIGHT

"Our brief for our concept artist [when it came to items] was 'what do you want this to say', 'what do you want this to express' [...] When I played Journey, you could tell a lot about a person's experience with that game from their scarf… we kind of want that with the items in Absolver, too"

"You can have a variety of equipment that gives you the protection level you want, while giving a different impression. Absolver's gear is all about the different stories you can tell people, just from how you look".

"This is especially true with a mask. The idea is to create a mystery about your identity. It's both a blessing and a curse. When you see the mask a certain person has chosen to wear, it can elicit more of a feeling than a face would: that's something we really found interesting and wanted to pursue."

"But there's a gameplay side to the gear, too: you need to balance weight ratios, stamina use and all that, but in a game that's all about encounters with players you've never met before, you want to project a certain image."



You'll need to perfect your flow in order to excel at *Absolver*: every attack has a 'perfect' window that will mean your moves take less stamina and get buffed slightly. Practice these a lot.

Being able to run through the whole game in co-op is a great choice, but just be aware: human 'allies' can turn on you whenever they like…

Every attack has its own property – from aerial to guard break to low. Making a deck with every attack type in it is going to be your key to victory.

the game (which change depending on your orientation to the enemy) and every move has a stance in which it starts and a stance in which it ends. This means canny players can figure out chains that can be unpredictable but perhaps quite weak, obscenely powerful but with lots of opportunities for the opponent to dodge or parry, or a complete mix of all the above that will be really hard to read (for player and opponent).

Now, these Combat Decks are tough to fill out: you start with a selection of moves related to the discipline you've chosen; after that, you can learn anything. To learn a move, you need to see it in action in the world – if you dodge it or block it, you'll gain XP for the attack. Just like in real life, become adept enough at preventing a move from damaging you, and you'll learn it yourself. This goes into your deck and gives you more variation to fight Absolver's myriad combatants.

Once you've built a pretty outstanding deck, though, you might want to share it with others: to that end, you can set up a Dojo and attract people to you to learn *your* moves and fight from *your* deck. SloClap anticipates this being a pretty big part of the game once it's launched, and is likely to be the drive that keeps players going once the (admittedly short) campaign is over.

"There are a number of layers to how you'll be able to play the game," Tarno explains. "It's easy to pick up and play – you have two attack buttons, you can guard, you can dodge. That's it. But then you add perfect attacks in – where you have to be really conscious of your timing – and that adds another layer of challenge, with you needing to be really in the flow to do well. But then you add feints, which create mind games in PvP which work really nicely with having to know your own Combat Deck, having to learn your opponent's Combat Deck… for competitive PvP players, people are going to go in deep, but it's the mix of complexity and simplicity that we think is really going to appeal to many different kinds of players."

We can see *Absolver* being a massive hit on platforms like Twitch, for this very reason. Imagine it: you've got an undefeated master warrior that's got hundreds of followers at his Dojo. His Combat Decks are infamous throughout the land, he is undefeated, the cream of the *Absolver* crop. Then one day, rustlings of a new player start to creep through the community. People on Twitter are talking of an upcoming kid, some faceless wonder. One day, this kid comes to challenge the master… and the community shatters. Some support the old guard, some support the new kid; it's a very likely reality in the world *Absolver* has created, and that sense of tight-knit fighting community is something SloClap has wanted to foster from the beginning. And it's all possible because every newcomer, every fighter that enters the ring, is a totally unknown quantity in some respects.

"When you fight someone in PvP in *Absolver*, it's totally different from other fighting games," Tarno explains. "If you go into a fight against, say, Blanka or Heihachi, you know their moves, what they can do. It's all about the match-up. In *Absolver,* you need to start by gaining an understanding about what your opponent's move set is: that introduces a notion of permanent adaptation, about learning who your opponent is and what he can do. That's the first layer of PvP combat. If your opponent is a good enough fighter, he can trick you by feigning his moves out – luring you in to try and parry and counter – and the whole fight becomes about mind games."

> "IT'S HARD TO GAUGE WHAT THE COMMUNITY OUTSIDE SLOCLAP IS GOING TO BE LIKE… BECAUSE IN TESTING HERE EVERYONE JUST WANTS TO TROLL EVERYONE"
> AURÉLIEN TOPIA, PROGRAMMING LEAD, SLOCLAP

SloClap is expecting *Absolver* to balance itself over time. As dominant strategies and Combat Decks emerge, Tarno expects counters to be built far quicker and more effectively than the studio could anticipate on its own; shaping the meta into a self-sustaining ecosystem where certain trends and strategies come up and get replaced on a cyclical basis (similar to how card games work, funnily enough). *Absolver* is, by and large, a game that will live and die on the strength and passion of the community that forms around it. "Sure, we're going to have to make some balances and tweak some attacks here and there, but I have a feeling that *Absolver* could – at a meta level – balance out for players. Think about it: two weeks after release, I guarantee you that there will be players out there that no-one in the studio will be able to beat [laughs]. That will happen, and we want that to happen, because that proves our game works."

Absolver's appeal doesn't just lie in its fighting, either – the art direction of the game feels just as unique as the combat. It's created with this watercolour setup that blends gorgeous natural environments with the crumbling architecture of a once-great human empire. The world itself tells as much of a story as the intentionally faceless characters do, and it all feeds into this sense of wonder and mystique that SloClap seems to have attuned itself to perfectly.





The way the characters move, too, feeds into this. Unlike the vast majority of games out there at the moment, *Absolver* has key-framed every single frame of animation, so every single movement fits the engine and the damage model exactly the way the studio wants. One animator told us that because SloClap is such a small studio, each animator got to choose their own favourite style and animate the attacks for that - but then the animators took a pass over them all together to make sure there wasn't a massive difference in visual style between each of the fighting styles.

The result is a game where every attack and move looks unique, the animation for it has been worked on lovingly and attentively, and the overall feel of the game is as varied and scattershot as you'd expect anything featuring mixed martial arts to be. *Absolver* seems to really understand the discipline of fighting and the myriad unique challenges that come with it, and not only has the game itself come to embody the process of training and learning, but so did its development, too.

"When we started out, we wanted to make a game that reflected the beauty and the depth of martial arts combat… we started on paper and drafted the whole system, where you start in one stance and flow into another. From there came the idea of letting the player build these attacks themselves, but also creating a fluid and dynamic style. I am so proud – so proud – that we have managed to hit that double objective, and in doing so have managed to create a game deep enough for PvP gameplay but built on a foundation of beauty and grace, too."

Absolver is SloClap's first game, and despite what we played being one of the most interesting and exciting projects in the fighting genre for a generation, Tarno still isn't content with the package he's put together. He still thinks there's room for more, room for better… but he understands that a game needs to ship, even if - from his own perfectionist perspective - there's still more that could be done.

"Here at [SloClap], we don't say 'this feature is cut'," he says, laughing, "we say 'this feature is post-launch'!" There are so many things we want to fit in, but there isn't time! We were talking to a friend at Ubisoft - a creative director - and he was saying 'games just don't want to be made'" he adds, laughing still. "Unless you're Blizzard or Naughty Dog, no one really finishes their games."

From what we've seen, though, *Absolver* has all the potential to be one of the biggest cult hits of the generation, following on spiritually from its biggest inspiration, *God Hand*. *Absolver* is ready to don its mask and walk out into the arena, and from what we can tell, it's bristling for a good fight.





The game also comes with a bonafide loot system, too, which can make your character slower but tankier, quicker but less durable, and look remarkably different depending on what you equip.

LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

Absolver wouldn't exist without the influence of a few very specific games - each of them is visible in the co-op brawlers DNA. We've broken them down so you don't have to.



DARK SOULS

The RPG and loot elements owe a lot to *Dark Souls*, as does the environmental setup: shortcuts and bonfire-like altars you have to activate. The early game's online PvP system also inspired the team when they were thinking about *Absolver*'s multiplayer.



GOD HAND

The staff at Sloclap basically worshipped *God Hand,* or so it seemed to us, and when we suggested that *Absolver* might be a spiritual successor to it, they didn't want to commit to that – for fear of offending the original's makers.



JOURNEY

Journey's voiceless online interaction has been massively inspirational to SloClap; the idea of not knowing who you're playing with, not knowing what their intentions are… it's a huge part of what makes *Absolver* such a unique prospect.



TEKKEN

The 3D fighting engine of *Tekken* has clearly left its fingerprints of the admittedly more complex stance system *Absolver* has gone with, but between *Tekken* and *Soul Calibur's 8-Way Run*, you can see *Bandai Namco*'s legacy in full force here.



GANG BEASTS

Absolver is, in many ways a brawler - yes it's more technically challenging and complicated than your party fighting games, but the team at SloClap said they played an inordinate amount of *Gang Beasts* – and you can see that rub off on the game.



THE BEST YEAR IN GAMING

IT'S A POINT OF CONSTANT DEBATE, BUT WHAT REALLY HAS BEEN THE BEST YEAR IN THE HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMES?

Hopefully we can all agree, 2017 has been a pretty strong year of games already. Releases like *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *Resident Evil VII*, *Persona 5* and many more have got us off to a great start, and the back half of the year is looking very good indeed. It could be one of the greatest years in this industry's young history, but it's brought up a classic debate among the **games™** team: what exactly was the best year in gaming? Here we've selected what we believe to be the standout years, thanks to the quality of games, influence, innovation and originality, and we've invited some experts to join us in explaining what makes these years great. But we'd love to know what you think, so reach out @gamesTMmag on Twitter to share your thoughts.

1985

THE YEAR HOME CONSOLES WERE REBORN

At a time when the videogame industry looked in danger of collapse, the release of the NES and with it the launch of *Super Mario Bros.* in Japan was the beginning of the revival of gaming's fortunes. It helped to refocus the industry on what was really important: making machines that could deliver high-quality entertainment.

1985 was the start of the revival and helped set things in motion for some important genres and series to come. We got to experience the insane action of *Space Harrier* with its faux 3D effects, the sidescrolling shooter excellence of *Gradius*, the explosive military gameplay of *Commando*, and the ghoulish joy of playing as Sir Arthur in *Ghosts 'n Goblins*.

Meanwhile, in the world of home computers, the seeds of the modern RPG were being planted thanks to *The Bard's Tale*, with the simple brilliance of *The Oregon Trail*, which got its commercial release on the Apple II, and *Ultima IV* helping to cement the role of morality or alignment systems in videogame RPGs, just as they has already been important in table-top experiences.

And so in one year, Sega cemented its place in the game publishing upper echelons, home computers continued to push more grown-up narratives, and Nintendo set the industry on a new path of excellence and innovation. What's more, so many of these games still hold up today, delivering the same ease of access, challenge and addictive qualities that they did over 30 years ago.



1985 was the year that saved the videogame industry. Following the crash of '83, the long-term viability of gaming was being questioned, with analysts beginning to fear that all hope of stabilising the market had been lost. It's funny, not once did they consider that a moustachioed plumber rocking a sweet red cap could ever save the day. Super Mario Bros. *is, without question, one of the most important and influential videogames ever created. It helped push players out of the arcades and into their living rooms with a NES in hand and, perhaps more importantly, it gave us the only true example of level design perfection: in World 1-1 we trust.*

JOSH WEST
FEATURES EDITOR, GAMES™

KEY GAME

SUPER MARIO BROS.

This was the game that turned Mario into a significant presence and created the Super Mario series as we understand it today. What's more, it opened up a sense of adventure and wonder like few games had ever achieved with its sidescrolling platform action and a wide array of perilous environments.













HONORABLE MENTIONS


COMMANDO


GRADIUS


SPACE HARRIER


GAUNTLET


ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR



1997

THE 3D ERA IS FIRMLY ESTABLISHED

We've often reflected that the cycle of great gaming years comes around the 10 year mark, and as such, we can't help but look back 20 years to see how true this theory happens to be. As it stands, 1997 was an extraordinary year in gaming, not just for the high quality of some of the games that were released, but the massive impact that so many of them would go on to have on the rest of the games industry.

A few key releases stand out as having been particularly influential – genuine leaps up in quality from what had come before. *Final Fantasy VII* stands out, as it helped to bring the Japanese RPG experience to an entirely new audience on the PlayStation. Meanwhile *GoldenEye 007* was doing something similar for console gamers and the FPS, making the experience more accessible while also introducing so many important concepts to an audience that hadn't been there for *Quake* or *Doom*.

And then there were the real heavy hitters that would go on to become gigantic franchises off the back of great success in 1997. Games like the original *Grand Theft Auto*, in all of its top-down glory; or *Fallout* with its limited but rather engaging isometric gameplay. And to cap it off, established hits just kept getting better, with *Tomb Raider II*, *Quake II*, *Crash Bandicoot 2* and more. The mid to late Nineties was certainly a hot streak for the industry.



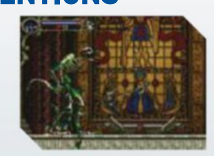
KEY GAME

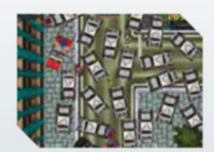
FINAL FANTASY VII

Released in January of 1997 in Japan and nearer the end of the year in North America and PAL regions, *Final Fantasy VII* saw an intense build-up and immense anticipation. When it arrived, its animated sequences and 3D graphics were unlike anything many had experienced before. *FFVII* is justifiably beloved to this day.

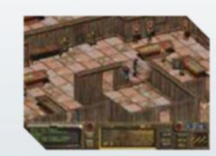
HONORABLE MENTIONS


GOLDENEYE 007


CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT


GRAND THEFT AUTO


GRAN TURISMO


FALLOUT



Thanks to growing up in Squaresoft's Europe-shaped blindspot, 1997 would mark my first encounter with one of my favourite franchises – Final Fantasy. This was the year that the PlayStation really started showing what it was capable of, and few games better demonstrated this generational leap than FFVII. *I remember being blown away by its crazy production values, especially at a time when sprite-based RPGs were still very much the norm. To say that I played it a lot would be an understatement, too – I still have the memory card with my 100% save (with maxed-out game clock), a relic from a true golden age for gaming.*



LUKE ALBIGÉS
EDITOR, PLAY

1981

WHEN LOOSE CHANGE BECAME A BOOMING BUSINESS

While home computing took a massive step up in 1981 thanks to a number of cheaper devices hitting the market and the launch of the BBC Micro, looking back at the big releases of 1981 is really about seeing how the arcade continued to dominate.

At the top of the pile was Shigeru Miyamoto's star-making turn on *Donkey Kong*, a release that spawned multiple franchises and set the foundations for the Nintendo family of characters.

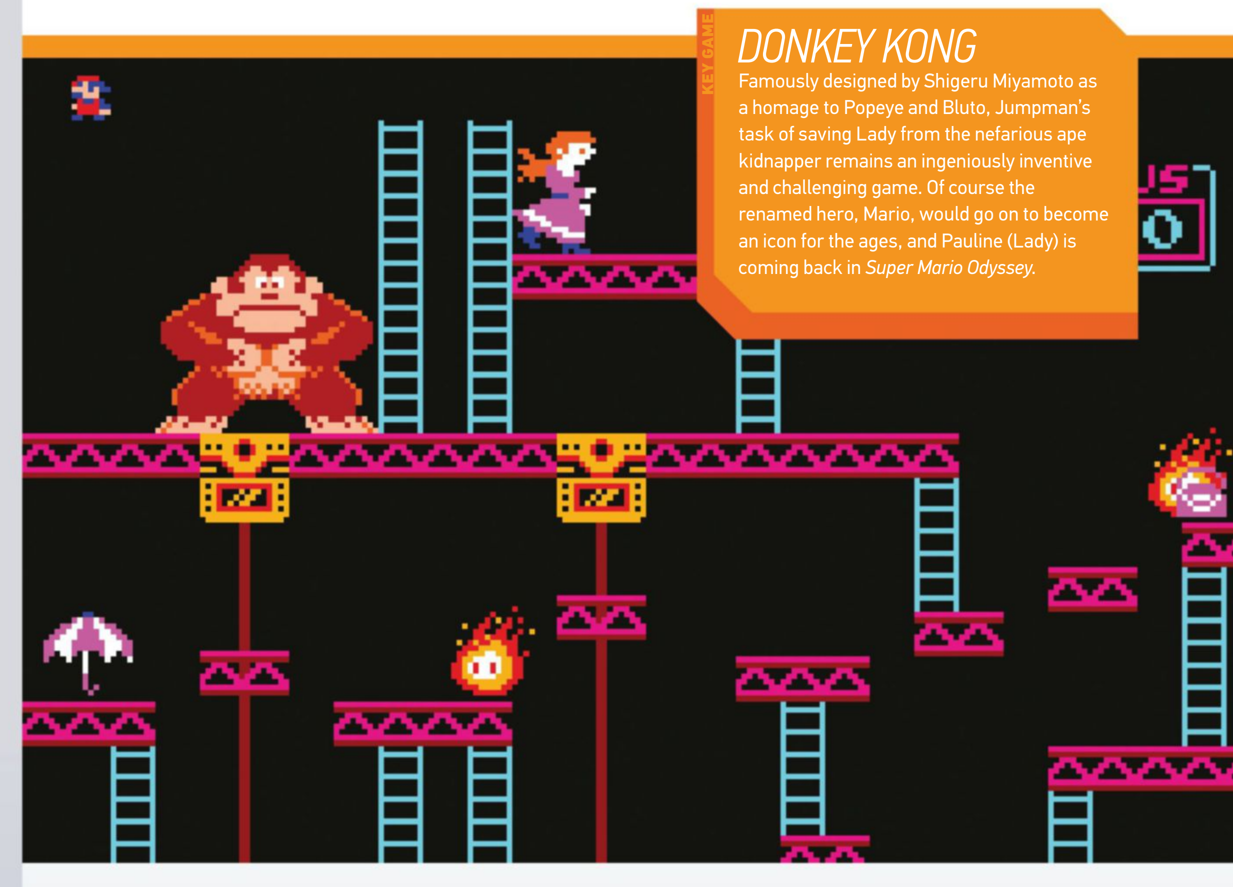
Beyond that, there were some absolute legends in the field of coin-munchingly addictive cabinet experiences released this year too. *Frogger* and *Galaga* stand out in particular as monsters of the form. Both made a tonne of money and saw ports and sequels through the years that followed on multiple systems. Games such as *Tempest* and *Defender* drew in plenty of attention and loose change too.

It was a good year for real innovation and genre experimentation, as *Castle Wolfenstein* helped to popularise the stealth action style, and *Space Dungeon* introduced the concept of twin-stick shooters to the world.

So as home computers were just becoming affordable, the arcade scene was becoming more and more competitive and exciting, delivering the kind of shooter and platforming experiences that would drive the industry forward through the rest of the decade. The mass popularity of gaming can really be tracked all the way back to this year.

I was only eight years old in 1981, but I was well versed in arcade games, which my dad used to babysit me while he played gigs in local pubs. While I was utterly mesmerised by the likes of Donkey Kong *and* Galaga, *it wouldn't be until I was older that I realised just how significant that period of videogames was. Many genres were still forming in those early days, and most of the real advancements were being made in arcades, where a combination of cash and creativity proved to be a devastingly dynamic combination. The likes of Walter Day have often described 1981 as the Golden Age of videogaming, and it's hard to disagree. Even now the likes of* Donkey Kong, Frogger, Defender *and* Scramble *are as playable as they were 36 years ago. I wonder if we'll be able to say the same thing about this year's releases?*

DARRAN JONES
EDITOR, RETRO GAMER



KEY GAME

DONKEY KONG

Famously designed by Shigeru Miyamoto as a homage to Popeye and Bluto, Jumpman's task of saving Lady from the nefarious ape kidnapper remains an ingeniously inventive and challenging game. Of course the renamed hero, Mario, would go on to become an icon for the ages, and Pauline (Lady) is coming back in *Super Mario Odyssey*.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

FROGGER



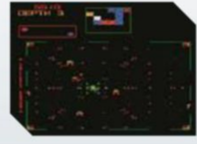
GALAGA



DEFENDER



TEMPEST



SPACE DUNGEON



2001

THE BLOCKBUSTER ERA BEGINS

With each passing year, the games industry has been able to move itself further forward in popular culture, breaking out of its place as a niche interest, and gradually becoming mainstream entertainment on a level with the biggest summer blockbuster movies. To our minds, 2001 was a key year in that transition, as a few games launched that captured imaginations and set the tone for the next decade and beyond.

Primary among those games is clearly *Grand Theft Auto III*, which took the already popular crime caper and driving mechanics of the 2D original, and developed a 3D sandbox experience unlike anything we'd played before. The ripples of this game are being felt to this day.

Similarly *Halo: Combat Evolved* simultaneously helped to launch Microsoft as a serious contender in the game console market and stepped up the presence of first-person shooters on console, leaping another level up from what Rare had achieved with *GoldenEye 007* and *Perfect Dark*.

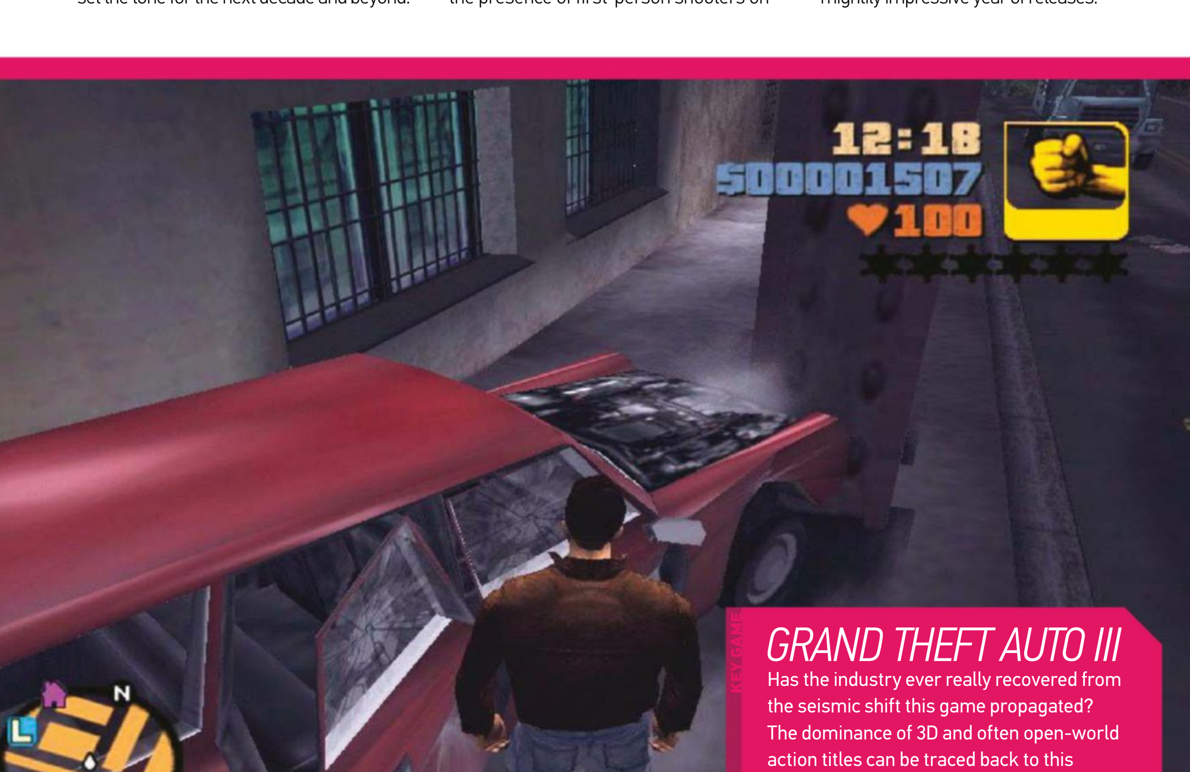
And then there are the other gems of the year, like the timeless *Ico*, the deeply creepy and affecting *Silent Hill 2*, the continuation of the Shenmue series, the wonderfully unique and endlessly cool combat of *Devil May Cry*, the origin of *Pikmin* and many more. In terms of the breadth of genres 2001 helped to advance, it was a mightily impressive year of releases.



While Blizzard was pushing PC multiplayer forward with Diablo 2 *and Battle.net, the real hero of 2001 was PlayStation 2.* Gran Turismo 3*, released less than a year after the console's launch, was a technical showcase (and entertaining racer) that hinted at what Sony's new console was capable of. For me, though, 2001 was the year of* Grand Theft Auto III. *It took me by complete surprise: a huge 3D world that felt like a real, living city beyond anything I'd experienced in a game. I spent 100s of hours in that world, and fell in love with the console that made it possible.*



PHIL SAVAGE
EDITOR, PC GAMER



KEY GAME

GRAND THEFT AUTO III

Has the industry ever really recovered from the seismic shift this game propagated? The dominance of 3D and often open-world action titles can be traced back to this revolutionary and wonderfully realised action game. Rockstar has grown stronger again and again since this release, but it may never release something as groundbreaking.

HONORABLE MENTIONS


HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED


ICO


SILENT HILL 2


MAX PAYNE


SUPER SMASH BROS. MELEE

1998

WHEN LEGENDS WERE BORN

The late Nineties offered a rich vein of gaming excellence, with each following year seemingly having picked up the baton with confidence and run a few extra yards down the track. What this ultimately meant was that we got a handful of games that really defined the very best of the era and that would preview the next phase of the industry as it grew in maturity and in its understanding of 3D world building.

Games like *Ocarina Of Time* and *Banjo-Kazooie* took 3D open-world exploration to new heights, building on Nintendo's strength in the world of adventure experiences, and bringing greater degrees of atmosphere to their respective creations. Similarly, *Metal Gear Solid* set a new bar for stealth action, translating Hideo Kojima's 2D model to a three dimensional world and finding new challenges and fun to be had in that space. Kojima also started to have a little more fun with the surrounding technologies of the time like memory cards, controller ports and so on.

But we also had the beginnings of a more adult form of gaming, be that in the thematic beats of *Half-Life* and *Thief: The Dark Project* or in the grittier, more realistic demands of *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*. This was a year for gaming to step up a level into a more mature artform and offer spectacle both in its visuals and in its narratives. The ripples of those experiments have lead us into some amazing directions since.



1998 marked the arrival of Half-Life, *and oh boy can you tell. With its numerous groundbreaking features, just like the impact of* Dark Souls, *pre-*Half-Life *and post-*Half-Life *games are painfully obvious. Abandoning cutscenes in favour of scripted events that you witness no matter if you stop and stare or sprint past, the sensation of the world carrying on around you regardless was as novel as explosions and bullets leaving marks on the walls. You felt like you were really there, plus the chapters (used instead of levelling up) emphasised the story above all, building the sense that you were at the heart of the narrative. All hail Gordon Freeman – and his marvellous crowbar.*

ZOE DELAHUNTY-LIGHT
GAMESRADAR



KEY GAME

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

Still considered by many to be the greatest game of all time, let alone the greatest Zelda game, *Ocarina* delivered a sense of adventure and discovery unlike anything else we had experienced before. It harnessed the core principles of what made the series so great to that point, and used its 3D design to enhance it all.

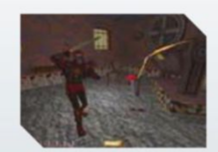
HONORABLE MENTIONS



METAL GEAR SOLID



HALF-LIFE



THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT



FALLOUT 2



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX



1991

16-BIT COMES OF AGE

It's almost hard to know where to begin with this year, the new releases and sequels, and the innovations they brought to the table were some of the most important in the industry; but perhaps just as remarkable is how well so many of these older titles have stood the test of time. Even today, many of 1991's biggest games are immensely engaging and fun to play.

The *Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* landed in Japan in this year, introducing many to the concept of a light and dark world mechanic, and setting the game on a path that would see it reinvent itself with every release. Meanwhile, *Final Fantasy IV* introduced the Active Time Battle system, delivering one of that series' great highlights in the process.

It's also hard to look past *Another World* for its influence on this industry. The animation style, the way it told a story without text, even it's clean HUD-less display, were all well ahead of their time. That's probably why it's one of the most chosen games when we ask developers for a game they love.

And we couldn't possibly talk about 1991 without mentioning one of the icons of the era, the mascot who helped to propel Sega forward in its battle for dominance with Nintendo, as *Sonic The Hedgehog* launched on the Mega Drive and brought a need for speed to a younger generation.



KEY GAME

STREET FIGHTER II: THE WORLD WARRIOR

Has the fighting genre ever really moved beyond Capcom's breakout arcade hit? We've certainly seen some fantastic fighters in the years since, and yet *Street Fighter II* is always coming back into our lives in one form or another. With its amazing cast of characters, simple mechanics but challenging high-level techniques, it still sets the bar to beat.



"Road Rash, Lemmings *and* Neverwinter Nights *served as an early appetiser for what was one of the most pivotal years in gaming.* Street Fighter II *launched itself into arcades and gave the fighting genre the wake-up slap it needed to get started. Sonic roared in on Sega's consoles in a bid to wrestle the mascot crown from Mario. But Nintendo answered with the SNES, and a trinity of must-have classics in the US:* Mario World, F-Zero *and* A Link To The Past. Monkey Island II *rounds off a phenomenal 365 days. 1991's games got me into gaming, and I'd say it's a perfect introductory list.*"



DREW SLEEP
PRODUCTION EDITOR, RETRO GAMER / PC GAMER

HONORABLE MENTIONS



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST



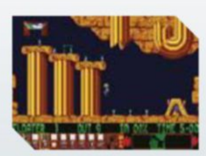
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG



FINAL FANTASY IV



ANOTHER WORLD



LEMMINGS



1986

FAMICOM VERSUS THE ARCADES



Every format from the arcade to home computers had a great year in 1986. While many of the hit games of the year were traditional linear experiences, a clear trend towards exploration emerged. Nintendo introduced both Metroid *and* The Legend Of Zelda *on the Famicom Disk System, two games that gave the player a world and very little direction. On home computers,* Turbo Esprit *provided cities that you could drive around freely, and even the arcade racer* Out Run *presented you with forks in the road. Players were gaining the freedom to shape their own experience for the first time, and thoroughly enjoying the results.*

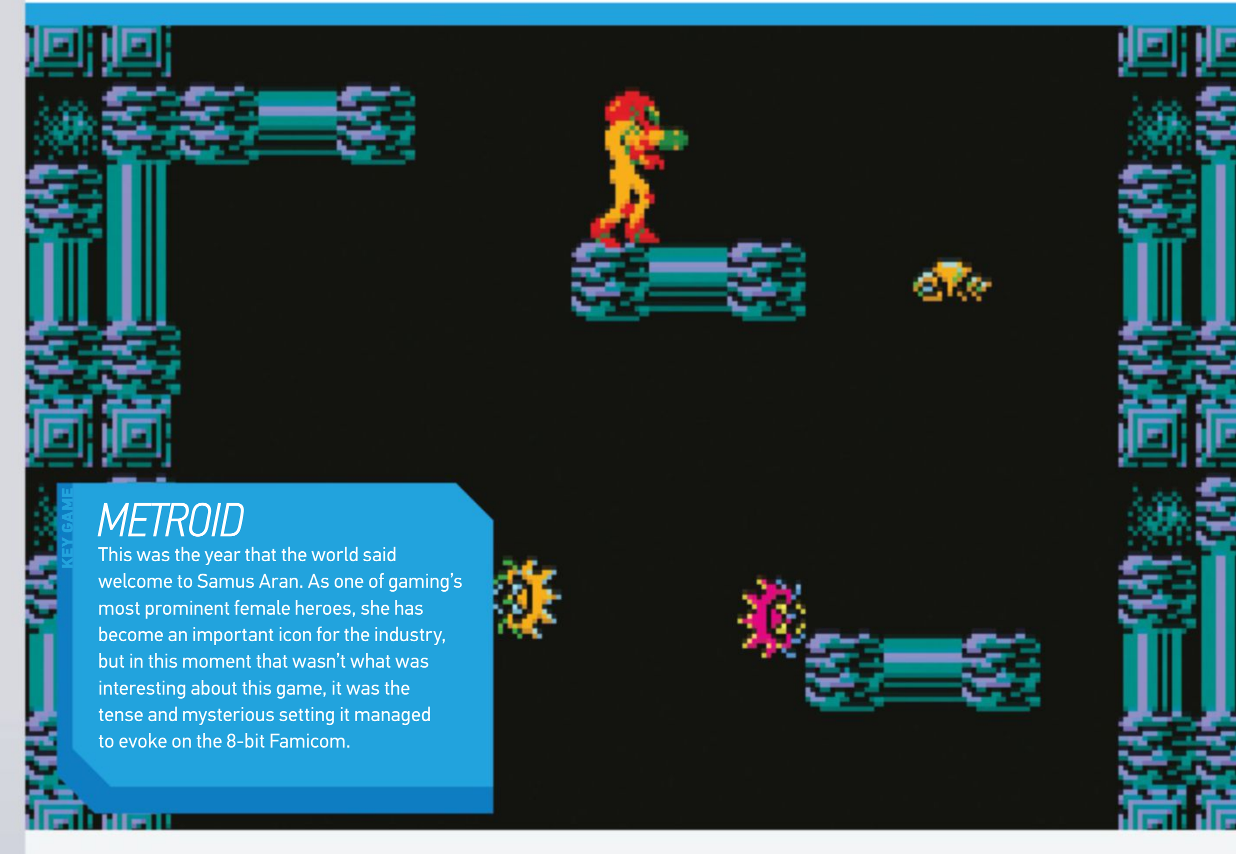
NICK THORPE
SENIOR STAFF WRITER, RETRO GAMER

Who had a better year? Was it the Famicom or the arcades? We're hard pressed to give a definitive answer – that's how strong the releases were this year. As with so many of the great years in gaming, it can claim to have *The Legend Of Zelda* in its roster, although this was the first year that would be true. Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka continued what would become a more than 30-year partnership at Nintendo with another extraordinary distillation of the pure joy of discovery, this time in a role-playing experience.

This was also the year that the Metroidvania style was started as both parts of that portmanteau got their first releases. *Metroid* and *Castlevania* launched in August and September respectively, and brought new depth and style to the platform adventure genre.

And as the console market put its nasty scare behind it, the arcades brought yet even more stand-out experiences to the fore with games like *Arkanoid* from Taito offering a new twist on *Breakout*, and *Out Run* showing Sega's mastery of high-octane action yet again, this time in the racing field, as Yu Suzuki continued his run of fantastic creations for the company.

In any other year it might have been *Kid Icarus*, *Alex Kidd*, *Ikari Warriors*, *Salamander*, *Rampage* or *Wonder Boy* that would dominate the conversation, but that's just how strong and broad 1986's titles were. A truly remarkable year for gaming.

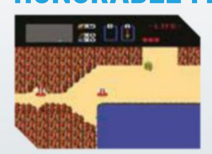


KEY GAME

METROID

This was the year that the world said welcome to Samus Aran. As one of gaming's most prominent female heroes, she has become an important icon for the industry, but in this moment that wasn't what was interesting about this game, it was the tense and mysterious setting it managed to evoke on the 8-bit Famicom.

HONORABLE MENTIONS



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA



CASTLEVANIA



DRAGON QUEST



OUT RUN



BUBBLE BOBBLE



2007

WELCOME TO MODERN GAMING

In so many respects we're still living in the glow of 2007's game releases. From *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* to *BioShock*, the games we got to experience ten years ago still carry so much weight and resonance today.

On the one hand, you have the epic blockbusters that have continued to dominate like the modern incarnation of *COD* and the record-breaking (at the time) release of *Halo 3*. Infinity Ward would set the bar for the next ten years in terms of FPS execution, while Bungie's sequel was the biggest gaming launch to date, firmly establishing the medium as an entertainment force on a par with the biggest Hollywood could hope to produce.

Working in tandem with these crowd-pleasers, we had the mature and thematically rich role-playing experiences of *BioShock* and *Mass Effect*, taking their cues from the deep RPG titles of the late Nineties and enhancing them through even more streamlined gameplay and a commitment to great storytelling.

These two new IPs weren't the only major new hitters in 2007 that continue to be influential today, as *Portal*, *Uncharted*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Rock Band*, *Skate*, *Crysis* and *The Witcher* all made their debuts. And as if that wasn't enough, the Wii took a step towards offering its diehard fans something to enjoy with the wonderfully inventive *Super Mario Galaxy* and the expertly translated gameplay of *Metroid Prime 3*: *Corruption*.

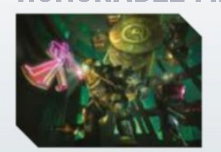


KEY GAME

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

When Activision's shooter series made the transition to a contemporary setting after years on the battlefields of World World Two, it didn't seem like such a big deal. But with its incredible single-player campaign, told simply but very effectively with some stunning set pieces, and it's fantastic multiplayer map design, *Modern Warfare* became the shooter to beat.

HONORABLE MENTIONS



BIOSHOCK



PORTAL



MASS EFFECT



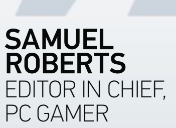
SUPER MARIO GALAXY



UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE



2007 was the year of Super Mario Galaxy, Halo 3, Crackdown, BioShock, The Orange Box, Mass Effect, Stalker *and* Uncharted *– every format ended up with at least one all-time classic. By the end of the year, Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo had figured out what their new consoles were about, and it's clear Microsoft was creatively miles ahead at the time. Meanwhile, Valve was still making new games rather than just a shop, bringing us* Portal *and the last glimpse of new Half-Life we'll possibly ever see in* Episode 2. *This was the year HD gaming came into its own.*



SAMUEL ROBERTS
EDITOR IN CHIEF, PC GAMER

1996

THE GAMES™ PICK

ONE YEAR TO RULE THEM ALL

Trying to decide what the best year in gaming was has proven to be a challenging and not always enjoyable job, but after measuring over three decades by every metric we could conceive, one year rose up above the others as truly brilliant. It was a year that saw massive leaps forward in game design and the popularity of the medium; it set the standards for several genres that were just finding their feet; and it firmly established games as the future of entertainment.

The biggest phenomenon of 1996 was *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*, which managed to permeate the public consciousness on multiple fronts. Its Game Boy debut was a monster release, and at an estimated 31 million copies sold, the most successful RPG of all time.

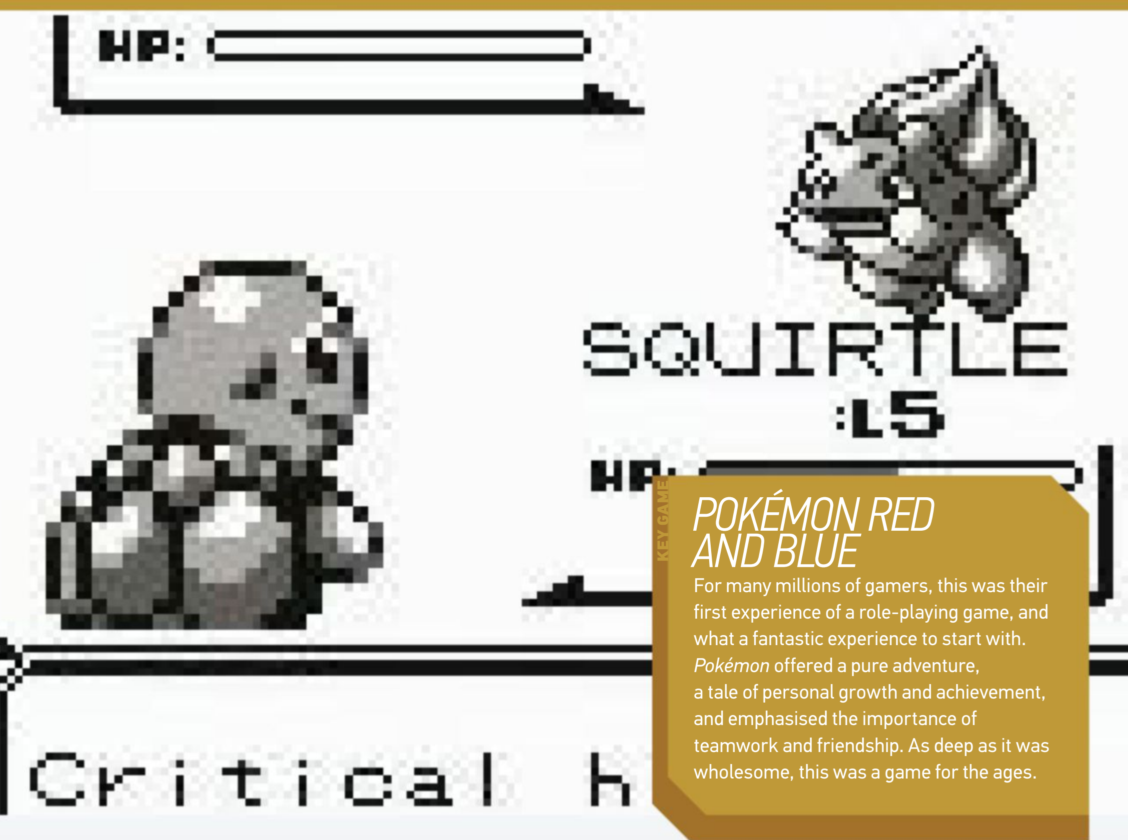
1996 also brought us the most potent examples of 3D action platforming, with Nintendo's *Super Mario 64* and Core Design's *Tomb Raider*. Mario's 3D turn managed to translate his 2D antics into a new dimension with incredible skill, while *Tomb Raider* launched Lara Croft as the new icon of the era.

And we can't talk about 1996 without mentioning the games that remain massively influential in their respective fields. *Resident Evil* is still one of the most important survival horror titles, and *Diablo* is still a gigantic presence for loot-a-thon role-playing games. Similarly, *Quake* arrived to offer a new benchmark for the arena shooter. This was an incredible year and one that still have a massive impact on the games we experience today.



I was in my mid-teens in 1996 and playing Tomb Raider, Quake *and* Diablo, *I could sense that this was gaming on a different level than I was used to. Growing up playing NES, SNES and Mega Drive games and now going on these epic and sometimes scary adventures was like moving from Space Jam to watching From Dusk Till Dawn. And in the meantime I was eating up every bit of info I could on the N64, nosed pressed up against the glass of localised release dates. Something incredible was happening in the medium I loved so much, and in some ways, it was the obsession that this generated in me that set me on the path to where I am today.*

JONATHAN GORDON
EDITOR, GAMES™



KEY GAME

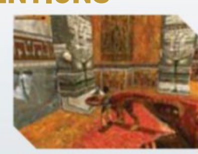
POKÉMON RED AND BLUE

For many millions of gamers, this was their first experience of a role-playing game, and what a fantastic experience to start with. *Pokémon* offered a pure adventure, a tale of personal growth and achievement, and emphasised the importance of teamwork and friendship. As deep as it was wholesome, this was a game for the ages.

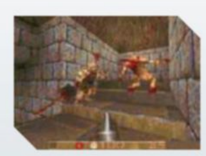
HONORABLE MENTIONS



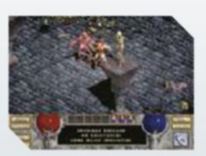
SUPER MARIO 64



TOMB RAIDER



QUAKE



DIABLO



RESIDENT EVIL



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Sam Troch via Facebook

Reviews



72

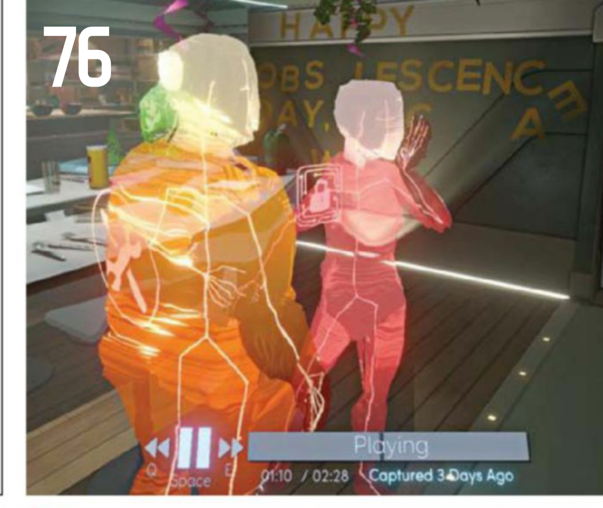
SPLATOON 2

How much further has Nintendo managed to take its innovative ink-focused shooter?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.

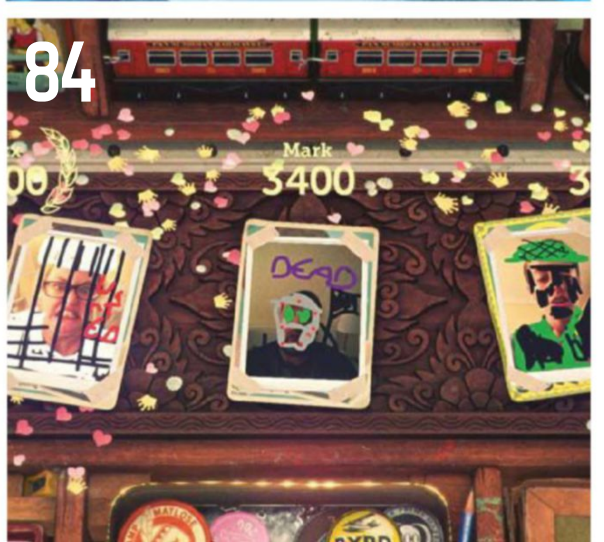












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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WHY CAN'T [TEAM CHAT] BE DONE THROUGH THE CONSOLE? IT'S STILL WOEFULLY BELOW THE STANDARD OF ALMOST EVERY COMPETITOR

APPY DAYS

Launching alongside *Splatoon 2* is the Switch Online App, which is a crucial part of Nintendo's online strategy and an important part of addressing some of the issues *Splatoon 2* has when it comes to playing with friends and being able to actually communicate with them. Signing in with your Nintendo ID, once you've created a room in the game, you use the app to send invitations to friends using a code that can be shared on most platforms, which is very useful. Voice chat is handled in-app, which does mean putting in a pair of headphones that will cost you the game audio. It's far from perfect and it's going to be interesting to see how this app evolves over the coming months.





PAINTING FROM A FAMILIAR PALETTE

Splatoon 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8 Online
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: There are loads of hidden secrets in the single player hub that require you to think outside of the box in terms of your movement.



Left: Sure, Pearl and Marina seem like the charming and fun new hosts, but after the millionth unskippable cutscene when you fire the game up, you'll learn to dislike them. A lot. It becomes very annoying very quickly.



There's been something of a 'new' Nintendo in the past year or so, making games with a clear acknowledgement of the changes that have taken place in the industry rather than burying its head in the sand and sticking – sometimes stubbornly – to its own ideas. No longer an insular, inwards-looking company, this new Nintendo is one who looks at open-world games, at fighting games and online shooters and takes influence from outside its four walls.

Splatoon 2 is probably the game that sums up this new era of Nintendo the best. It's an arena shooter – a genre that Nintendo traditionally wouldn't go anywhere near, a very Western idea – but it has a very classically Nintendo twist on things. You're not just trying to take out your opposing team, but instead the core of the game is about painting the arena with your team's paint. It's a great little mechanic, meaning that those who couldn't hit a barn door with a banjo don't feel completely useless, because as long as they're painting the floors and walls, they're contributing towards a team victory.

'Team' victory. That's the key here. *Splatoon 2*, like the original, is very much a game about teamwork, strategy and execution. Being able to quickly pinpoint active zones of action and get the right player with the right weapon to that area is paramount to real success in a hard-fought battle and is extremely satisfying to pull off. Finding that weapon that lends itself to your specific style of play and then slotting into a team of others who are all doing their best job to beat the opposition is as rewarding here as it is in *Overwatch*, or even *Rainbow Six: Siege*. It may be a game where anyone can pick up a controller and make an impact on a match, but it is those who look at the genuine depth in the strategies available to a team of players who are going to get the most out of *Splatoon 2*.

It offers just about the bare minimum of extra content to avoid any chat of it being a 'glorified expansion' of the original game. As before, the meat of the game is the online stuff, where you have Turf War, which is the casual, standard *Splatoon* game mode about covering the map with your team's colours, alongside a Ranked mode and a new League mode, which is ostensibly ranked but for teams of players. This is where you'll spend most of your time, taking on others and levelling up your Inkling kid, buying new weapons and gear with your winnings. The game still cycles two maps every hour, what seemed like a controversial move at first is actually quite smart, as it ensures that every map is played regularly and that everyone has the chance to really scout every corner and figure out strategies. They're different dependant on the online mode, too, so if your favourite matches are currently doing the rounds in Ranked, then you know it is time to jump in and paint some targets.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MASS OF MODES: Not only does it look a lot nicer, this has all of the modes added to the original post-launch. It's also easier, if not completely straightforward, to play with pals.

The game types are also mode specific, with Ranked having game types that focus on pushing the combat into controlled areas, like Splat Zone, which has both teams battling it out to colour two defined areas and the Rainmaker, which has both teams competing to push a powerful weapon to a spot on the map, like the Payload in *Overwatch*. These modes are geared slightly more towards actually taking out other players and require more traditional shooter skills to be successful in, rather than the chaos of Turf War.

Despite being far from the main focus, the single player mode is an enjoyable, if short, romp through a series of levels that are all these little self contained challenges, requiring you to use your knowledge of what movement options the game gives you as well as some tricky shooting sections and some excellent bosses. A particular highlight is Octo-Oven, a giant bread oven, possessed by a big pink tentacle that tries to splatter you by firing hot loaves at you. As you progress, you buy upgrades for weapons, ink containers and abilities, some of which feed back into

the main multiplayer part of the game, which is a nice touch and gives you a reason to check out a single player mode that could very easily have been completely throwaway. It's a lot of fun.

There's also a few new weapons this time around, and for a company that has never really embraced videogaming's obsession with the tools of war, there's some really genius guns in *Splatoon 2*. The Splat Duelies are an instant favourite, two blasters that allow you to do a dodge roll, giving you not only a means of evasion but also focusing both into one lethal spot for a short time immediately after. Its take on the shotgun – the Splat Brella – packs a deadly punch up close, but also allows you to use the Umbrella aspect as a shield so you can get into that range in the first place. They sit nicely alongside the full returning roster of firearms, all of which offer unique strategies when partnered with others in a balanced team.

The most interesting new mode is the horde mode equivalent, called Salmon Run, where loads of Salmonids, essentially zombified fish, invade a series of maps that are only accessible during certain timeframes (when the Salmonids are spawning, apparently). You play through three waves of increasing difficulty, with the goal being to get as many golden fish eggs back to the nest during each wave. The golden eggs are dropped in stacks of three by one of seven boss type mobs, all of which provide a unique way that they mark the stage with paint and way to beat them. Although they're all fairly easy to deal with when they're on their own, combinations of them can lead to some truly fiendish situations that can cause chaos within even the most well-drilled teams. Seeing a good run fall apart because someone didn't spot a Maw appearing underneath the entire team is equal parts frustrating and hilariously entertaining, and the fact that unlike most horde modes that take ages to play through, the average Salmon Run takes about ten minutes, so you can fire straight back into one. It's such a shame this mode isn't playable outside of specific hours, unless you're in a local multiplayer setting with multiple Switch consoles and copies of the game.

For the longest time, Nintendo seemed completely against its titles being played at a serious, competitive level. Look at its behaviour when it comes to the vast Smash Bros community, where a few years ago it wanted it pulled from the world's biggest fighting game event, showing a huge lack of awareness of a side of gaming that has gotten bigger and bigger since. There's more subtle things too, an example of which being the Blue Shell in *Mario Kart 8* – a game that allows for some genuinely skilled play, but rewards you with a Blue Shell from some amateur in 9th place for your troubles. The balance mechanic equivalent of a sledgehammer when truly, something more akin to a scalpel is needed. It leaves *Mario Kart* in a weird position where it can't ever be anything more than a 'bit of a laugh' and that was all Nintendo appeared to be after. There's nothing fundamentally wrong with that – it wants everyone to play, not just those taking things seriously – but with a game as brilliant as the original *Splatoon* was, it was agonising to see all of that potential

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE NETCODE?
Not a single laggy game in near 100 matches. It's very solid, very stable and very impressive.

Q. ANY MICROTRANSACTIONS?
Absolutely not, but there's a system using in-game currency to buy XP boosts in a microtransaction-style manner.

Q. DO THE SQUID SISTERS RETURN?
Sort of, but they've been replaced as in-game hosts by Pearl and Marina, who have quickly become fan favourites!



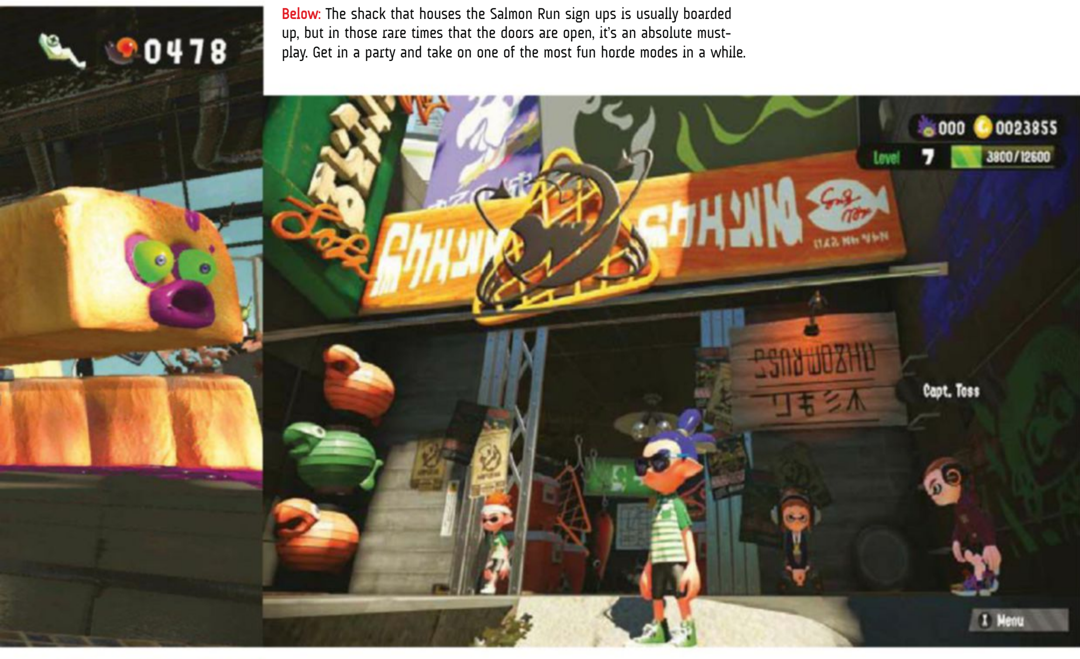
Right: The single player mode bosses are all superbly designed and a lot of fun to fight, playing out like little combat puzzle sequences.



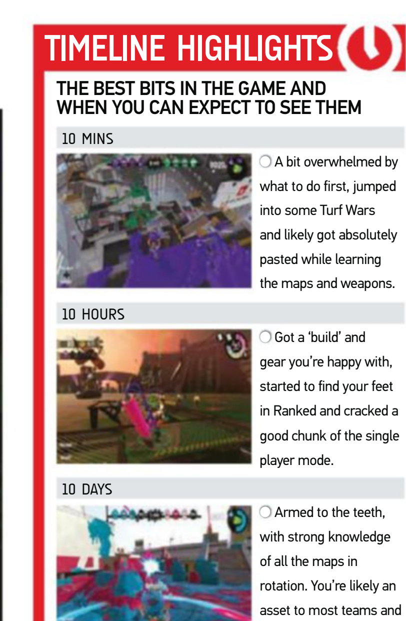


Above: The bosses in Salmon Run are what keep things interesting. Simply dealing with different combos of them causes some unique challenges.

RATHER THAN PUT OUT SOMETHING THAT RESEMBLED A FULL-ON 'TRUE' SEQUEL, THIS IS MORE OF A REFINEMENT



Below: The shack that houses the Salmon Run sign ups is usually boarded up, but in those rare times that the doors are open, it's an absolute must-play. Get in a party and take on one of the most fun horde modes in a while.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS

A bit overwhelmed by what to do first, jumped into some Turf Wars and likely got absolutely pasted while learning the maps and weapons.

10 HOURS

Got a 'build' and gear you're happy with, started to find your feet in Ranked and cracked a good chunk of the single player mode.

10 DAYS

Armed to the teeth, with strong knowledge of all the maps in rotation. You're likely an asset to most teams and feared in the Turf War.



SPLATFEST CLUB

Returning in this sequel is one of the most fun parts of the original – the Splatfest, a monthly contest where players have to pick a side in a fairly arbitrary debate. Dogs or Cats, Pizza or Burgers, Snow or Sun and so on. Something that is innocent enough to not actually upset anyone, but polarising enough to create a real feeling of a war effort. You play matches, scoring points for your chosen team, while the Inkopolis Square hub is adorned with pictures drawn by other players using the in-game tools. These vary in quality from dreadful to genuinely impressive. It's a great way to galvanise the player base and mix things up once a month.



go to waste because of an extremely naive approach to the multiplayer by Nintendo.

You couldn't play with a group of your friends at launch in *Splatoon*. Voice chat was a no-no and by the time it had patched in the ability to party up with others, the ship had sailed. And yet, because it is so much bloody fun, it didn't really take a massive hit in the review scores. Strange, because if any other online shooter was released without those features, it would be taken to task. Mercifully, that is not entirely the case with the sequel. It's a lot easier to get into games with friends, but in terms of actually communicating with them, that's still quite a big issue. Outside of using the official app to party up for private matches, your best bet should you wish to chat with friends is looking to third party solutions, which is far from ideal. Of course, many questions are still there as to why this can't just be done through the console and why it's only private matches that allow you to use the app, but overall there's a definite improvement in terms of finding friends online, if still woefully below the standard of almost every competitor.

It still has a touch of the leftover ridiculous stuff from the original game. For instance, once you've joined a lobby, you can't change loadout without completely leaving the one you're in. Or, if you join a lobby and there are barely any players in it, you're stuck there. You can't leave the lobby until the timer runs out. And making you jump through hoops because you want to chat with your team, in a game that truly shines when you're part of a well-oiled machine, is ridiculous. It's all a hangover from an older Nintendo who seemed incapable of making a tight online experience.

It's a Nintendo that we're seeing less and less of as of late. Sure, there's the odd strange decision here and there, but *Splatoon 2* is yet another example of a company that is hitting a similar stride to when it was at its creative peak – when new features seemed like innovations, not gimmicks. Importantly, *Splatoon 2* does improve on the original in every way. Rather than put out something that resembled a full-on 'true' sequel, this is more of a refinement, an acknowledgement of not only the shortcomings of the first game, but also, as mentioned before, that there are titles out there who do a lot of this stuff better and have been doing it for a long time. There's no shame in lifting any of that, because other arena shooters could do far worse than lifting something from *Splatoon 2* for themselves. Except that app thing. Let's forget about that in a hurry.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE HORDE: Salmon Run is such a fun mode it's a real shame it isn't something that can be played at all times. It wouldn't be a surprise to see that change shortly after launch.



VERDICT 8/10

ONE OF NINTENDO'S FINEST, DESPITE SOME ODD DECISIONS

IT'S LEFT TO YOU TO PICK UP THE PIECES

Tacoma

Truth be told, we were a little worried about *Tacoma*. The Fullbright Company had built its reputation on diving deeply into the mess and pressures of ordinary life. Of using locations that feel unnaturally close to home, of utilising very real touch-points and milestones as a way of establishing a story with humanity; wrought with the kind of natural tension and intrigue that we can so often encounter in our own lives. With *Gone Home*, the studio's 2013 debut, Fullbright used nostalgia as a framing device, presenting a narrative driven by familiarity – it worked to great effect. But *Tacoma* is something different; set in 2088, aboard a high-tech space station in lunar orbit, there were concerns that the world it presented would be too alien, too unknown, to provide the emotional connection and counterpoints that the studio so clearly thrived on.

But Fullbright has once again demonstrated its masterful proficiency in taking slice-of-life vignettes and turning them into gripping adventures. *Tacoma* is a thrilling insight into the heart of humanity, giving us the space to explore the idea that, while technology and locations may change and warp over time, we, as people, never will. No matter how far into the stars artificial intelligence may take us, it will only enhance every aspect of our being – pulling the lens in closer to our very best and worst qualities. *Tacoma*, over the space of just a handful of hours, is a beautiful reflection and dissection of these themes.

It's masterful in its restraint; the trust Fullbright places in its player to put the pieces of this mystery together is still, in the grand scheme of things, relatively unprecedented. Videogames that put the same weight on storytelling as they do underlying mechanics and systems are still something of a rarity, although *Tacoma* has managed to weave all of these together in a way that few titles have been able to achieve this succinctly.

Tacoma works because it still relies on very natural qualities and emotions to drive its narrative. It asks you, a contractor for The Venturis Corporation – owner of the now

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: The Fullbright Company
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.6ghz Intel i5-equivalent processor or higher, 4 GB RAM, Onboard or dedicated graphics accelerator with 1GB+ of video RAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

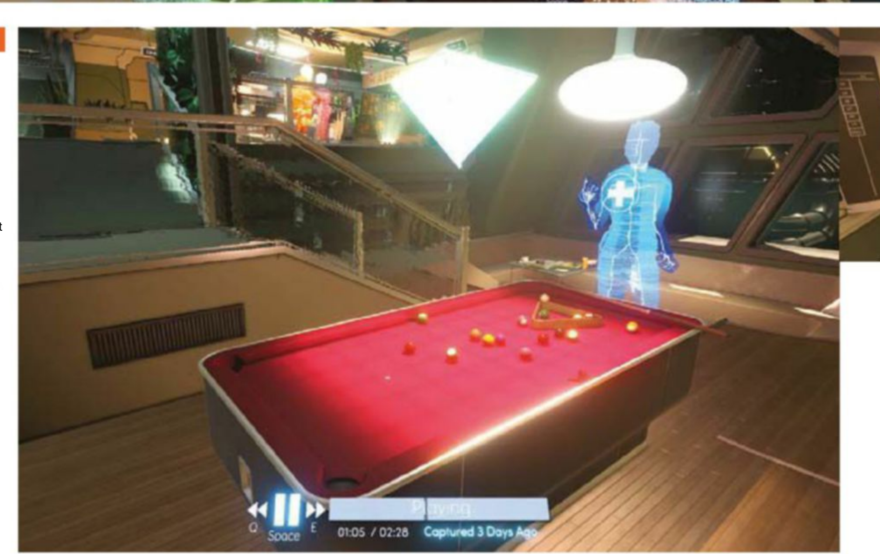


FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS TACOMA?
Tacoma is going to take between two to five hours to complete, with a deeper narrative experience waiting for those willing to explore.

Q. IS IT WORTH £14.99?
Well, that depends entirely on how much you value fantastic interactive narratives. This is a story that couldn't be told in any other medium.

Q. BETTER THAN GONE HOME?
It is… different. While *Gone Home* succeeded in its ambition of being a period piece, *Tacoma* has considerably larger ambitions, and it achieves them effortlessly.



IT'S A MASTERCLASS IN VISUAL STORYTELLING THAT NEVER FAILS TO SURPRISE OR ENGAGE





Below: *Tacoma* succeeds by weaving a number of different narrative threads throughout its experience, giving you just a hint of many of them. Your ability to piece them all together into one succinct timeline is half the fun.

Above: Being able to fast forward, pause and rewind through scenes lets you experience each scene from every angle and in every detail. It's a truly impressive, immersive game tool that presents some interesting situations. Right: Despite being set in the year 2088, aboard a small lunar space station, The Fullbright Company should be commended on how lived in and *real* the area feels. It's foreign by nature, but vastly realistic.

BETTER THAN — THOMAS WAS ALONE

AS GOOD AS — GONE HOME

dormant Tacoma space station in which the game takes place in its entirety – to move through its crawlspaces and living areas in an effort to discover what happened to the station, its crew and the wayward AI, ODIN, following an accident just days before your arrival. You are tasked with going area to area, picking up scrambled digital 3D recordings of pivotal moments in the crew's life aboard the station. Exploring these reveals echoes of happiness and tragedy; the captured moments surround you in the physical spaces, and through manipulation of these augmented reality recordings you are able to rewind, fast-forward and pause every situation as it is played back to you, giving you time to examine and reflect on events from different angles and perspectives. What you'll quickly find is that each scene is driven by very human impulses: fear and happiness, ambition and jealously, love and confusion, and, above all else, an inherent desire to survive – no matter the cost.

It's through these digital representations of the crew members that you will begin to piece together the wider picture. They are, for a time, just threads. *Tacoma* never gives you the full story, instead it is up to you to bring it all together with what little information you are able to discern from your surroundings and the items left behind. The recordings themselves are often fractured, meaning the timeline will jump and shift, bringing in divergent conversations and tangent stories that will only reveal themselves the deeper into the mystery you dive. What's impressive here is that each room isn't a static element – they are multi-layered and multi-pathed. That is to say, that there are often multiple stories and scenes to observe, interact with and digest all at once; rewinding and fast-forwarding through these scenes as you run between crew members, trying to desperately get a sense of what's going on. Every angle brings new details; every parallel story thread more questions.

What's compelling in this is that, in spite of the erratic timeline jumps, the game moves with an unnaturally fierce forward momentum. The tension is palpable; where *Gone Home* injected a sense of unnerving horror into its unoccupied spaces, *Tacoma* builds to a different type of fear. As the picture crystallises, as you get a true sense of what has occurred here, it'll feel as if you are racing against time to get answers – all the while becoming increasingly aware that you have no true agency in the situation. You are simply documenting a catastrophic event, and there is nothing you can do to change it; nothing you can do to alter the destiny of a crew you'll quickly come to know and align with.

Fullbright has been able to weave so much into *Tacoma* in such a small space of time. One detail that really reveals itself on a further playthrough is just how deep each of the crew are: each has a specific role to play – a task they are responsible for to keep the station functioning – but, just as with real life, each also has extenuating circumstances to consider. As the interactive investigator assigned to explore Tacoma, you'll discover all of them, and the experience is so much richer because of it. It builds to a much wider world, one that exists far beyond the walls of the Tacoma station. The greatest shame of the game is that it eventually ends. We would love to spend more time exploring the intricacies of the speculative far-future society Fullbright has created here – a testament to the world building and story work.

Tacoma is an experience that could only be delivered in this format. It is enhanced by the fact that it is a videogame, not restricted by it; only possible because of the interactivity that the medium affords it, effectively demonstrating the true potential of videogaming as a device for intricate, innovative storytelling.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BE KIND, REWIND: The ability to rewind, fast forward and move through parallel story threads is a gorgeous mechanic that never fails to totally immerse in every scene.



HOW DEEP DOES THE MYSTERY GO?

What's truly impressive about *Tacoma* is how deep its mysteries go if you're willing to put in the time and effort to properly explore every part of the station. With so many narrative threads to pick up on and explore it can be all too easy to get distracted, but – just like with *Gone Home* – those that are willing to go the extra mile will find a vast variety of extensive crew records, personal artefacts and notes that only add an extra layer of narrative substance to the experience. Considering how contained the station is, and how break-neck the pace of the game can feel, it's a wonder how The Fullbright Company has been able to leverage such deep exploration with a narrative that has so much forward momentum.

VERDICT 9/10

A STUNNING INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING EXPERIENCE

IT'S AN INSIDE JOB

Black The Fall

It's not a good idea to remind your players that they could be playing a better game, a mistake that *Black The Fall* repeatedly commits. To say that it copies the superior *Inside* would be a step too far, but you can understand why such an accusation might be levelled at it. The visual style, the atmosphere it tries to cultivate, the ideas behind its puzzles, and even some of its scenes, borrow heavily from Playdead's lauded puzzle platformer. These attempts to emulate the best bits of *Inside* are so transparent, its recycling of its ideas so brazen, that you can't help but compare the two. The effect is to focus your attention on the ways *Black* always falls short of the game it wishes it could be.

You play as a man trying to escape from a totalitarian communist regime. Futuristic technology that supports the regime's oppressive, securitised nature clashes with the dilapidated, crumbling architecture and bleak conditions in which its people live. The developers say this world is inspired by their native Romania's history as part of the communist Eastern Bloc. That may be the case, but it feels like a million other generic dystopias. If the intention was to say something about the particular nature of communist Romania, or how that experience resonates with the world we live in today (there are hints that this *is* the intention), then it fails to get that across.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Romania
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Sand Sailor Studio
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT AND THE RAIDERS OF THE LOST QUARK



WORSE THAN



INSIDE



Above: Coming across a large group of people all staring in one direction at something off camera is a moment you might remember from *Inside*. That's not the only parallel you'll be seeing in this game.

Your escape through the brutal and barren landscape of The Fall involves a bit of platforming and lots of puzzle solving. This often means hiding in plain sight (yes, a bit like in *Inside*). There is, for example, a section where banks of workers cycle on power-generating bikes. If you hop on one as the red glow of a security camera sweeps past, you will go unnoticed.

Many of the game's puzzles are based around controlling others (yes, a bit like in *Inside*). You quickly gain access to a laser pointer that can be used to direct workers, and later, a robot companion, to interact with objects or draw the attention of cameras. While this forms the backbone of the game's puzzles, they are rarely repetitive. In fact, there are a few nice ideas in there, but the potential in the original ones is never fully realised and too many are inferior attempts to emulate you know what. There's often something hampering your enjoyment too, be it imprecise controls, a crucial pipe failing to stand out from the murky scenery, or a camera shooting you down in a place you were convinced you wouldn't be spotted.

It's let down by execution, it fails to realise its potential, and it's certainly not *Inside*, but *Black The Fall* isn't a bad game. It's average. Unfortunately, when there are so many great 2D puzzle platformers out there, average just won't do.

MISSING LINK

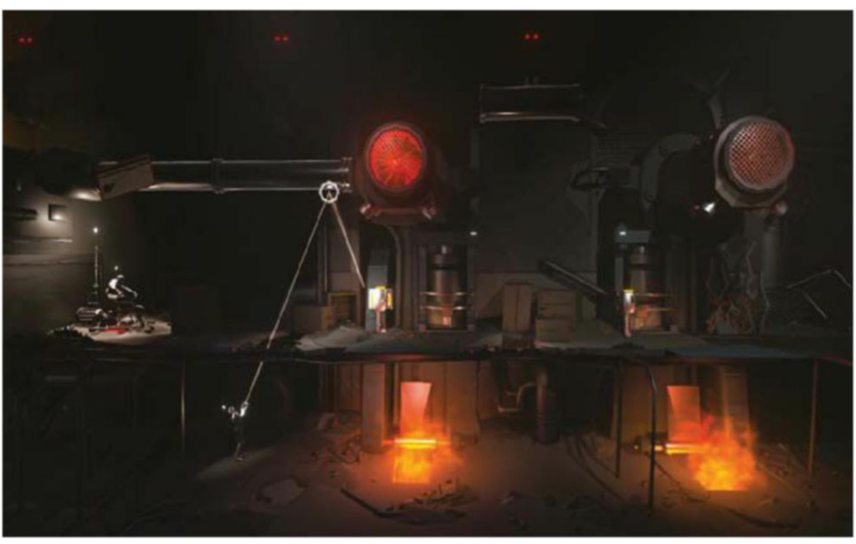
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

IDENTITY CRISIS: There's nothing wrong with taking inspiration from great games. *Black The Fall* is an example of what happens when you go too far, however. It's missing its own identity.

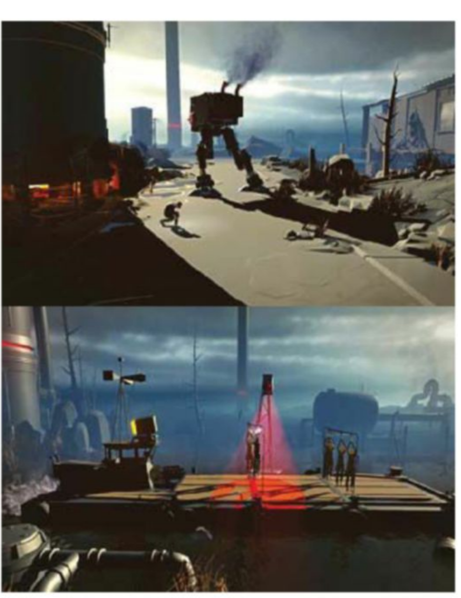


VERDICT 5/10

TRIES AND FAILS TO REPLICATE INSIDE'S BRILLIANCE



Above: Using your laser pointer, you can direct your little robot companion to go where you want and interact with objects. In this case, a panel on the side of the cube.

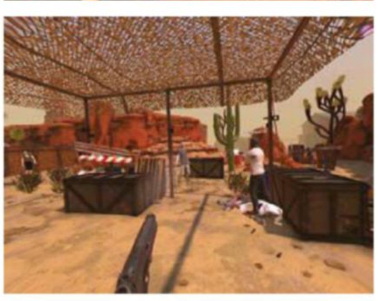




While the new Aim controller should be your optimum way of experiencing *Arizona Sunshine*, its utilisation when interacting with objects is absolutely woeful and can make for some truly awkward moments. You can tell the game was built around the original motion controls.

Below: There are a large number of different weapons in *Arizona Sunshine* but most of them feel very similar to use. Only the truly heavy machine guns give you any real sense of power, allowing you to gloat as chunks fall from your enemies.





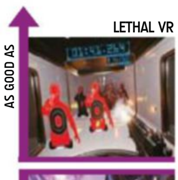
WILL THE PC VR CLASSIC SHINE ON PS4?

Arizona Sunshine

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSVR
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Vertigo Games
DEVELOPER: Vertigo Games, Jaywalkers Interactive
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS



LETHAL VR

WORSE THAN



FARPOINT

Hailed as one of the best experiences you can have on Vive and Oculus, *Arizona Sunshine* arrives on PSVR with a fair amount of expectation. What a pity then that a sloppy conversion ruins what could have been a tremendously fun game.

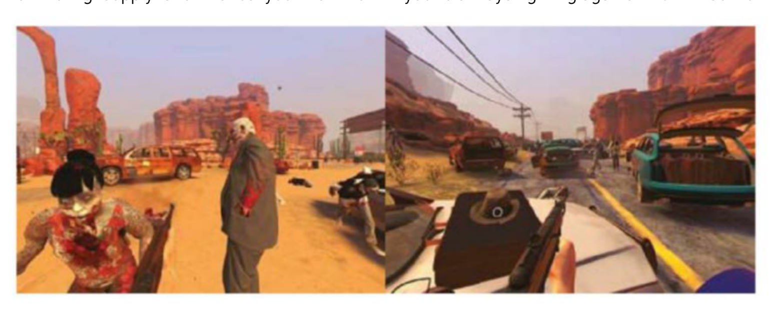
One of the most refreshing aspects of *Arizona Sunshine* is its bright vibrant setting, which is at odds with the dour gloomy exteriors used by many similar VR shooters like *The Brookhaven Experiment*. It instantly makes you want to explore the well-crafted world, makes you eager to loot every abandoned vehicle and house you encounter in the hope of finding more ammo for your dwindling supply and makes you want to find out what's at the end of the radio signal you're following. It helps as well that your protagonist is surprisingly chipper, despite the situation he finds himself in, cheerfully calling zombies by the collective name of Fred and never short of a pithy one-liner.

So, it's a shame that *Arizona* is constantly compromised and stops you from truly enjoying the game. Right from the off we were experiencing problems, with poor tracking and jittery controls ruining what should be a tight, precise shooter. Regardless of whether you play using the Dual Shock, motion controls or the Aim controller (which features a new balanced mode for two-handed weapons) you're always fighting against them in some way. The motion controls are great for general shooting and being able to easily grab the additional weapons that you carry, but you have to rely on teleporting and can't move backwards, which feels absolutely archaic after the leaps made by *Farpoint*. The Aim controller handles movement brilliantly, but it lacks the freedom that firing independently with two controllers offers and as the game progresses the difficulty ramps up. Oh and aiming down the sights of your many different guns is virtually pointless due to the insane amount of jitter that you experience.

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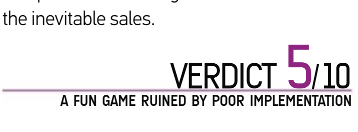
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STRONG AND STABLE *Arizona Sunshine* smacks of being unfinished and rushed out. Fix the jittery controls, expand the movement options and properly optimise it and you'd end up with a vastly different and far more enjoyable game.



It's a pity that the controls feel so borked, because when *Arizona* works it can be tremendously satisfying. Watching multiple zombies' heads pop as you take them out shot by shot is a wonderfully empowering feeling, but it rarely happens when you need it to, meaning you always feel at the whims of lady luck. The campaign is short, but well crafted and it's enjoyable enough that you'll want to consider the co-operative mode that's available too. Speaking of online play, *Arizona Sunshine* also features a horde mode that supports up to four players. It's tense to play, but is hampered by a confined playing area and a distinct lack of maps.

With a suitable patch, *Arizona Sunshine* could be something really special. Unfortunately, its current tracking issues and compromises outweigh its benefits. Wait for the inevitable sales.



VERDICT 5/10

A FUN GAME RUINED BY POOR IMPLEMENTATION

BULLET HEAVEN

Nex Machina

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Sweeden
PUBLISHER: Housemarque
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

***Nex Machina* will kick your ass.** It'll chew you up as you try and blast hordes (and we mean *hordes*) of enemies whilst dodging a barrage (and we mean a *barrage*) of bullets. And that's okay, because being chewed up like this hasn't been so fun since *Robotron*.

You see, developer Housemarque has teamed up with *Robotron*'s legendary creator, Eugene Jarvis, to create a supercharged version of the classic twin-stick shooter, and for the most part it damn well delivers. Enemies come thick and fast and the challenge lies in dodging various types of enemies while delivering a variety of your own punishment back at the robotic horde. Bosses show up at the end of each world and test your reactions further by filling 90 per cent of the screen with lasers, although they don't feel as refined as the bosses featured in Housemarque's earlier arcade-style game, *Resogun*.

The game's best moments are when you think you're done for; when you're about to be overwhelmed, but your laser weapon just about recharges and you let rip. Or when the screen is filled with gunfire and you use your character's dash to nip in and out of safe spots in a pseudo ballet with bullets. It's exhilarating, and the game's voxel-based destruction physics complement it perfectly, creating awesome spectacles of chaos. It's a shame the game doesn't come with a photo mode to really show these moments off; however this came to *Resogun* in a free patch so it's likely *Nex Machina* will receive the same treatment.

Each of the game's six worlds sport 15 sub-areas and are filled with humans to save and discover their secrets – extra levels, secret humans and score-showering 'Harvesters' and 'Visitors'. It gives what's superficially an extremely short game a near-unlimited amount of replay value as you discover the optimum path through each screen, and it perfectly emulates the 'one-more-go' compulsion from classic arcade games from the Eighties.

There's actually a decent visual language behind it all, too. Everything harmful is in reds, oranges or pinks, where secrets and power-ups are blue-hued. It makes discovery easy amongst all the carnage, and it lets you focus on what matters: surviving and racking up a huge score.

Surviving is hard in *Nex Machina*, though. You'll die, a lot, and it'll always be your fault. The game punishes slow reactions and reckless choices, and some of the game's later levels can get ridiculously tough if your character isn't equipped up with the full suite of power-ups. If you lose all your lives, you can use a continue, but it's a 90-degree difficulty curve if you do so because you're back at square one in terms of power. Like Samus facing up against Mother Brain with just a Power Beam, it's a near-impossible task.

But if you've got a masochistic love for tough, punishing games and a love for Eighties-inspired media you were probably on-board from the screenshots alone. *Nex Machina* is, objectively, a fantastic game, but its short length and focus on score-attacks for longevity could alienate those on the fence.

VERDICT 9/10
A NEAR-PERFECT DISTILLATION OF GAMING EXCELLENCE

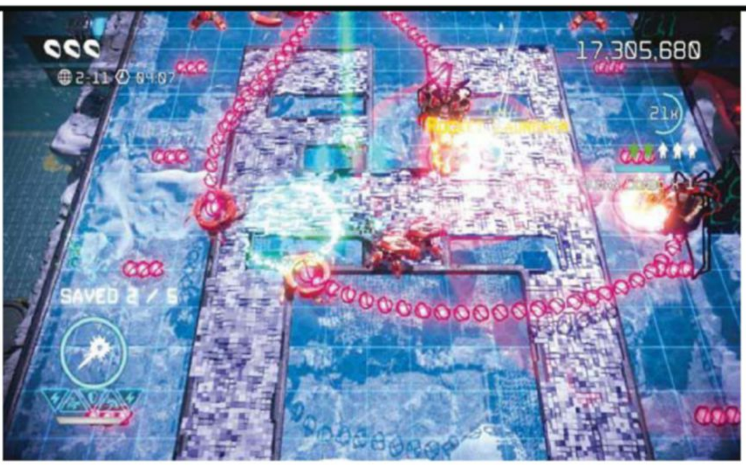
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

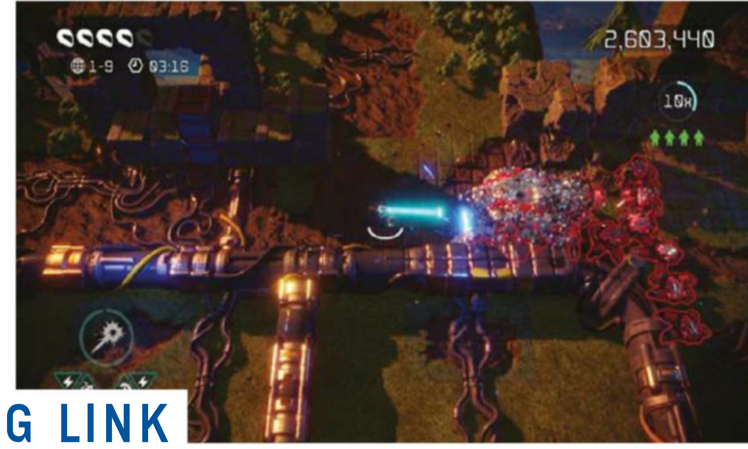
ONLINE CO-OP: Despite coming with local multiplayer, the online features of *Nex Machina* are limited to leaderboards. The absence of proper online multiplayer here is strange, especially as it features in other Housemarque titles.

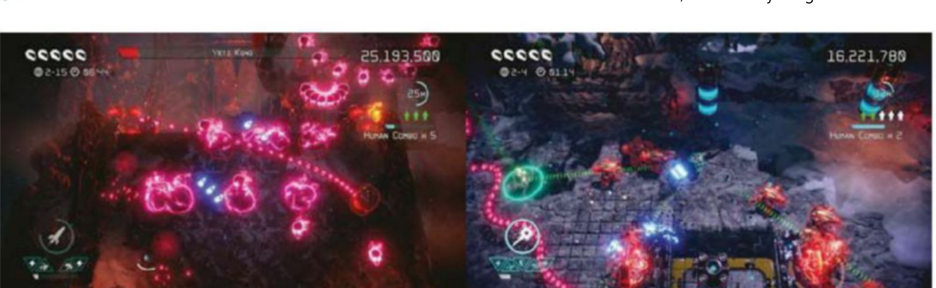
BETTER THAN: PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION 2

WORSE THAN: GEOMETRY WARS: RETRO EVOLVED 2



Above: The game is packed with opportunities to rack up your score: for example: if you press dash at the end of the level as these two circles line up, you're awarded 1,000 extra points.





Above: This may look hectic, but this screenshot is an example of the easiest difficulty, Rookie. The higher levels add more enemies, more bullets and speed everything up.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Arzest
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

CHIBI-ROBO! ZIP LASH

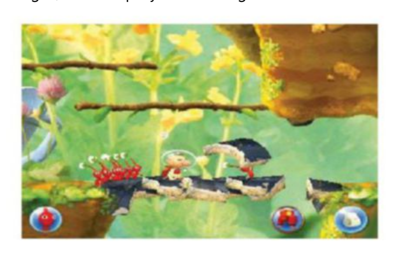


PIKMIN 3

OLIMAR'S LUCK DOESN'T CHANGE

Hey! Pikmin

Considering the challenge Nintendo created here in trying to translate the gameplay of a 3D Pikmin world into something that would work as a 2D puzzle platformer, *Hey! Pikmin* stands up pretty well. And if that reads like we're throwing a lot of qualifiers at Arzest's latest 3DS release then we can only acknowledge that while this isn't necessarily the most inventive or challenging game you'll ever play, it does manage to maintain the all-important cute spirit and sense of discovery that is core to the Pikmin experience, and that alone keeps it light, fun and playable throughout.





Above: The different traits of the pikmin have carried over from the other games and you can have them farming resources for you near your crashed ship to speed up your recovery.

Your control is limited to the left analogue and touch screen, no jumping but a limited jetpack capacity, which forces you to be vigilant and mindful of the abilities different pikmin add to your arsenal. As with the original series you're hunting around for artefacts, in this instance trying to gather up as much Sparklium as you can to get Captain Olimar's ship back up and running. With the way in which items and small collections of pikmin are hidden around each stage, the experience reminded us frequently of a toned-down *Mario Vs Donkey Kong*. The two aren't really all that close in terms of gameplay, but they share something of the same spirit, and some of the puzzling elements of finding the right pikmin for the right task and the right path through work pretty well.

What is a little more frustrating is dealing with enemies, which is held back in part by what is otherwise a smart mechanical choice: the varying physics of the pikmin types. Throwing the different pikmin leads to different curving arcs of a throw. That's great as a puzzle mechanic and for reaching distant items, but frustrating in a tight platforming section with an enemy bearing down on you as you keep throwing your pikmin into the ceiling. However, since fighting enemies is hardly the focus of this experience and having them around offers at least some challenge to the overall game, such a small annoyance falls away in the face of such miniature merriment.



SMALL AND IMPERFECTLY FORMED

FOR THE BOMB BATTLER ON A BUDGET

Flip Wars

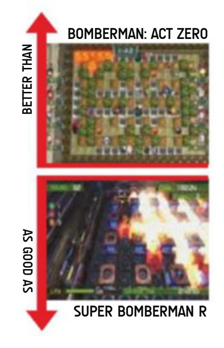
As if it heard our wails of discontent, *Flip Wars* is exactly the kind of local-multiplayer focused, four-player action that doesn't cost full price that we had wanted to enjoy and recommend when the Switch launched. Sadly *Super Bomberman R* was a bit of a disappointment, but this game rises up beyond its limited focus and basic gameplay to actually be a bit of a delight.

Mixing the essential gameplay of *Bomberman* with *Othello*, you move your character around and perform hip drops on the ground to turn tiles in the arena to your colour. Depending on the game mode you must then either end with the most tiles when time runs out, or score a number of knockouts against opponents by catching them on one of your turning tiles (like the trail of a bomb going off if you can imagine that idea). The core gameplay of either mode is exactly the same, just with a different focus of either concentrating on your own game or trying to chase and catch someone else.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Over Fence Co.
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BOMBERMAN: ACT ZERO



SUPER BOMBERMAN R



Above: If you can't get enough players around to play a quick game you can fill the empty slots with AI bots whose difficulty can be set before you begin the match.

Stages with different layouts and environmental effects add a little extra strategy to your thinking, but not much. With only handful of area variants and three styles, there's not a mass of stage variety here. And there's not a great deal of personality either. The avatars look a little liked they walked out of *Metroid Prime: Federation Force*, which you should know is no kind of compliment.

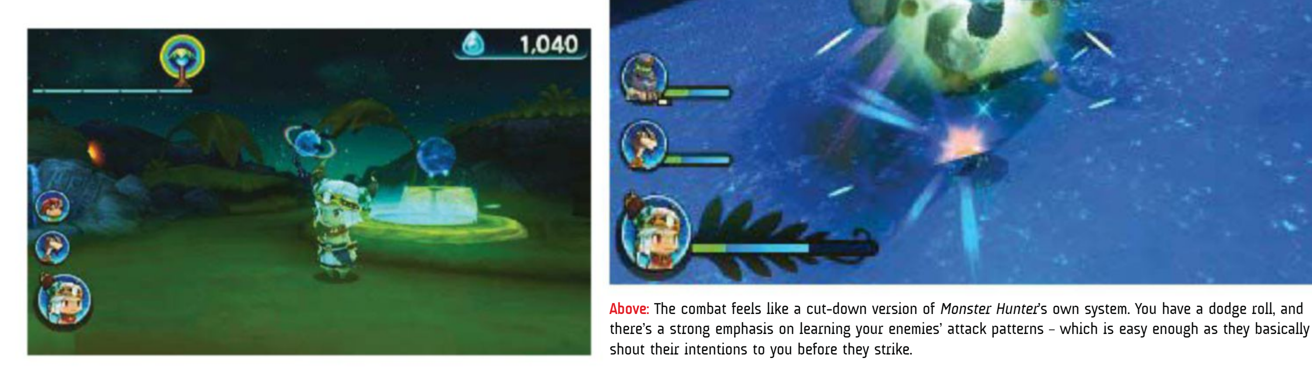
And technically it's not as smooth and carefree as it could be. Some input lag can really put a dampener on a high-pitched battle with friends or online and the frame rate isn't always fantastic. That said, it is insanely easy to play, with just one button input needed for jumping and the analogue for moving around. It's not a game claiming to have depth or great narrative reach, it's not trying to impress you particularly, but it is promising some diverting multiplayer fun and on that level, and for the price, it delivers enough to get by.



PRETTY MUCH NO FRILLS, BUT GOOD FUN WITH FRIENDS

DEFINITELY, MAYBE…

Ever Oasis





Above: The combat feels like a cut-down version of *Monster Hunter*'s own system. You have a dodge roll, and there's a strong emphasis on learning your enemies' attack patterns – which is easy enough as they basically shout their intentions to you before they strike.

Koichi Ishii is JRPG royalty, having worked in prominent positions on the Final Fantasy and Mana franchises before heading up Grezzo, developer of the Zelda 3DS ports, and now *Ever Oasis*. Ishii's experience working on acclaimed titles certainly shows in his latest game: as contrary to the majority of JRPGs that wash up on our shores, all of *Ever Oasis*' systems actually work towards the game's overarching objective: which is to build a thriving community, and stamp out evil growths of 'Chaos'.

But, strangely, the biggest influence on *Ever Oasis* isn't Ishii's classic RPGs. No, there's a strong vein of *Animal Crossing*, of all things, running through it. Roughly half of your time in the game is spent making sure your residents are happy and that their shops are stocked up with the raw materials they need in order to peddle their wares. Keeping your community happy and thriving entices more nomads to join your Oasis and lets you skim profits from their stalls and ultimately grows your Oasis' overall size. This acts as a pretty nice period of downtime to the game's other half: straight-up action-RPG exploration and Zelda-esque dungeon crawling.

You can venture forth into the wilds with an entourage of two of your Oasis' residents, each with their own abilities and proficiencies – being able to turn into a seed and roll through small entrances, for example – which prove essential in exploring dungeons. Throughout this phase of the game you're subject to by-the-books action-RPG gameplay where you use basic combos to defeat enemies. It's serviceable and by no means bad, but it feels that Grezzo just wanted to pass the bare minimum for combat and not really push beyond that.

And that's the main problem with *Ever Oasis*: it has its toes dipped in two different genres and as a result doesn't excel in either of them. There's no real challenge to keeping your residents happy, you just have to keep their stalls' stock topped up every morning. In the event that an Oasis-dweller does have a quest for you, you've already probably got the item they need just by naturally exploring the overworld. And the 'action' parts of the game are laughably easy once you learn how each enemy telegraphs its one attack. You unlock more combos and learn a few skills, sure, but it doesn't fundamentally change how basic the overall system is.

It's a shame its systems come off as shallow, because *Ever Oasis* has the potential to be great. Dungeons are a pleasure to explore, featuring puzzles that are just the right amount of cryptic, and the game is extremely polished and looks great on the six-year-old hardware. It has undeniably got charm, too. It's clearly aimed at younger gamers and it hits that audience perfectly. Older players will be left wanting something a bit more substantial, however.

DETAILS

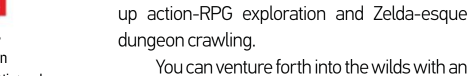
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Grezzo
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: ANIMAL CROSSING NEW LEAF



AS GOOD AS: DRAGON QUEST HEROES II





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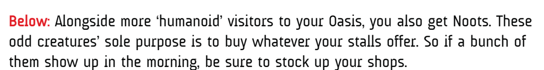
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TEAMING UP: The explorative nature of *Ever Oasis* lends itself perfectly to *Monster Hunter*-style co-operative gameplay, so it's a shame to not see it present here. There's even squandered potential in visiting other players' homes, too.



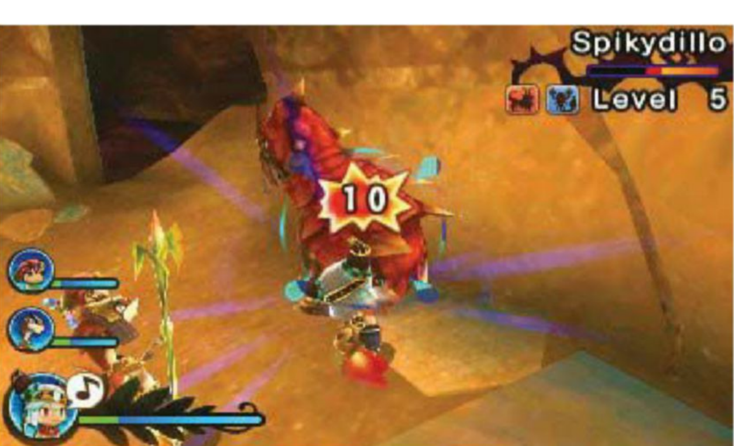
VERDICT 6/10

GOOD, BUT MAY LEAVE YOU THIRSTY FOR MORE



Below: Alongside more 'humanoid' visitors to your Oasis, you also get Noots. These odd creatures' sole purpose is to buy whatever your stalls offer. So if a bunch of them show up in the morning, be sure to stock up your shops.







The remastered cutscenes look spectacular and bring the cartoony aspects of the villains and heroes to life.

TEACHING NAUGHTY DOG SOME NEW TRICKS

Crash Bandicoot: N. Sane Trilogy

The *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy* is somewhere between a love-letter to Naughty Dog and your standard remaster. It's clear Vicarious Visions has poured its heart and soul into remaking the original series of games, warts and all, and the result is a game that feels authentic and satisfying to hardcore *Crash* fans… but also often frustrating, too.

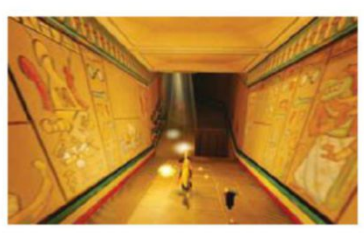
Graphically, the game is a masterpiece – seeing the harsh, bright polygonal planes rendered in a gentle HD fuzz is wonderful, and doesn't impact how you perceive spacing or perspective in the 3D levels too badly either. Every enemy and breakable object has been remade – some looking much better for it – and the environments have lost nothing in the perilous journey upscale. The attention to detail in the three games' backgrounds now really comes to life: loving little Easter eggs in the games' scenery that were once easy to overlook are now front and centre, and it all just shows so much respect to the franchise. It's really quite touching.

What is different is a little bit about how Crash handles. Because the original game's code has been scrapped in favour of a total rebuild, you'll notice Crash is a little 'slipperier' than he used to be, making the game occasionally frustrating by sliding you off platforms or obstacles you know full well wouldn't have done so before. Some of the collision detection seems questionable at times, the hitboxes unpredictable and the margin of error apparently random – this can be frustrating.

Once you get used to this, however, the game settles down a bit, but it makes the first title even harder than it was back in the day. We recommend playing with the D-Pad over the analogue stick: sometimes the new, slightly looser control scheme can be a bit too floaty, and the D-Pad offers more control to offset that. Plus it feels more authentic, too. There's an inverse difficulty curve that becomes apparent when all games are held up together – *Crash Bandicoot* is hard, *Cortex Strikes Back* eases up a bit, and *Warped* remains the most consistently fun.

Vicarious Visions has managed to add Time Trials to *every single level* in the collection, too, stepping it up from just *Warped* in the original trilogy. If you're a hardcore platformer fan, this adds massive amounts of replayability to the game – and rest assured, getting the top tier reward on each level is just as tough as getting Platinum in every *Warped* level was. You've been warned.

Vicarious Visions has put together an incredible remaster, here: by rebuilding *Crash* from the ground up, taking the best elements from every game and mixing it all back into one well-presented, well-engineered package, the studio has proved that remakes and remasters really can offer fans something new. It's just a bit of a shame about the occasionally inauthentic controls.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Vicarious Visions
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

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A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A REMASTER, WARTS AND ALL

KNOWING ME, KNOWING YOU

That's You!

First things first: yes, we agree, the name is terrible. And yes, a terrible name can be the harbinger of an awful game, too. To *That's You!*'s credit, it's not quite as bad as the name suggests… although it's also not that great, either.

A party game like *Jackbox Party Pack*, *That's You!* is a competitive experience for up to six people in which players use their smartphones to participate in a series of activities, from simple Q&As and fill-in-the-blanks, to mimic games and artistic challenges. The game takes you to one of a limited selection of backdrops – a cosy tent, or a Parisian hotel room, for instance – and asks you and your buddies a series of questions.

Play with just one other friend, and your points are pooled collaboratively to ascertain just how well you know one another. From three players onwards, though, it's every player for themselves. Thinking alike nets you points – especially if you've concurred with the majority of the team, or played one of your jokers – and, unsurprisingly, the person with the most votes at the end wins. Simple, eh?

To Wish Studios' credit, it looks great. The brief vignettes are stunning, which is a bit frustrating given you spend half your time staring at your phone. That said, players' own contributions – from selfies to artwork – integrate seamlessly into the game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Wish Studios
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

USE YOUR WORDS





JACKBOX PARTY

WORSE THAN



Above: The effects available to distort (and maybe improve?!) your selfies are pretty terrific – and occasionally terrifying, too.

Talking of which: to participate, you need to download an app onto your smartphone and play via Sony's PlayLink system. During our time with it, no-one had any issues (we used both Apple and Android devices) except for a funny five minutes when one phone kept inexplicably disconnecting itself from the game despite being on the same Wi-Fi network. When it did work, though, transmitting from your phone to your PS4 was almost instantaneous. Impressive stuff, really.

The game maintains it has over a thousand questions, but it doesn't feel like it. By the time you hit your third round, there's already a serious sense of deja vu, and while, theoretically, the questions may be different – "who would be the mastermind of a bank robbery?", "who's most likely to be arrested in a foreign country?", "would you walk away or cause a scene at a rigged carnival game?" – they're all pretty samey.

Will it make you laugh? Probably. The selfie rounds, in particular, had us giggling. Although we don't think we laughed once at any of the 'funny' one liners from the Christ-will-you-please-shut-up presenter.

A brief word of caution, though; this isn't a family game. While there is a filter to turn off the most embarrassing questions (although we didn't know this immediately), unless you're keen to know what your dad or daughter would do on a one-night stand, you might want to be selective about your fellow players. Just in case, like.

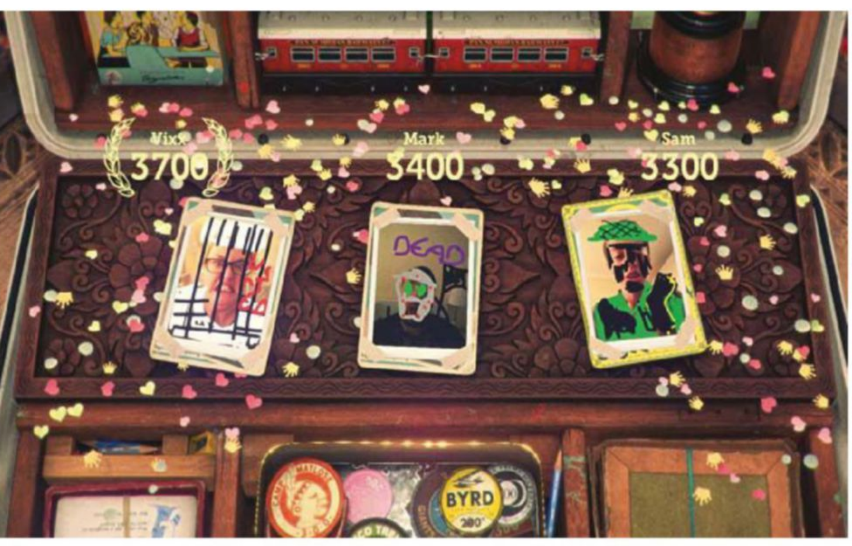
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ACCESSIBLE FOR NON-GAMERS: That's You! is a shining example of a deceptively easy premise that enables everyone to participate, even if they've never seen a controller before, let alone used one.

VERDICT 5/10

AS A FREE PS PLUS GAME, IT'S WORTH A LOOK



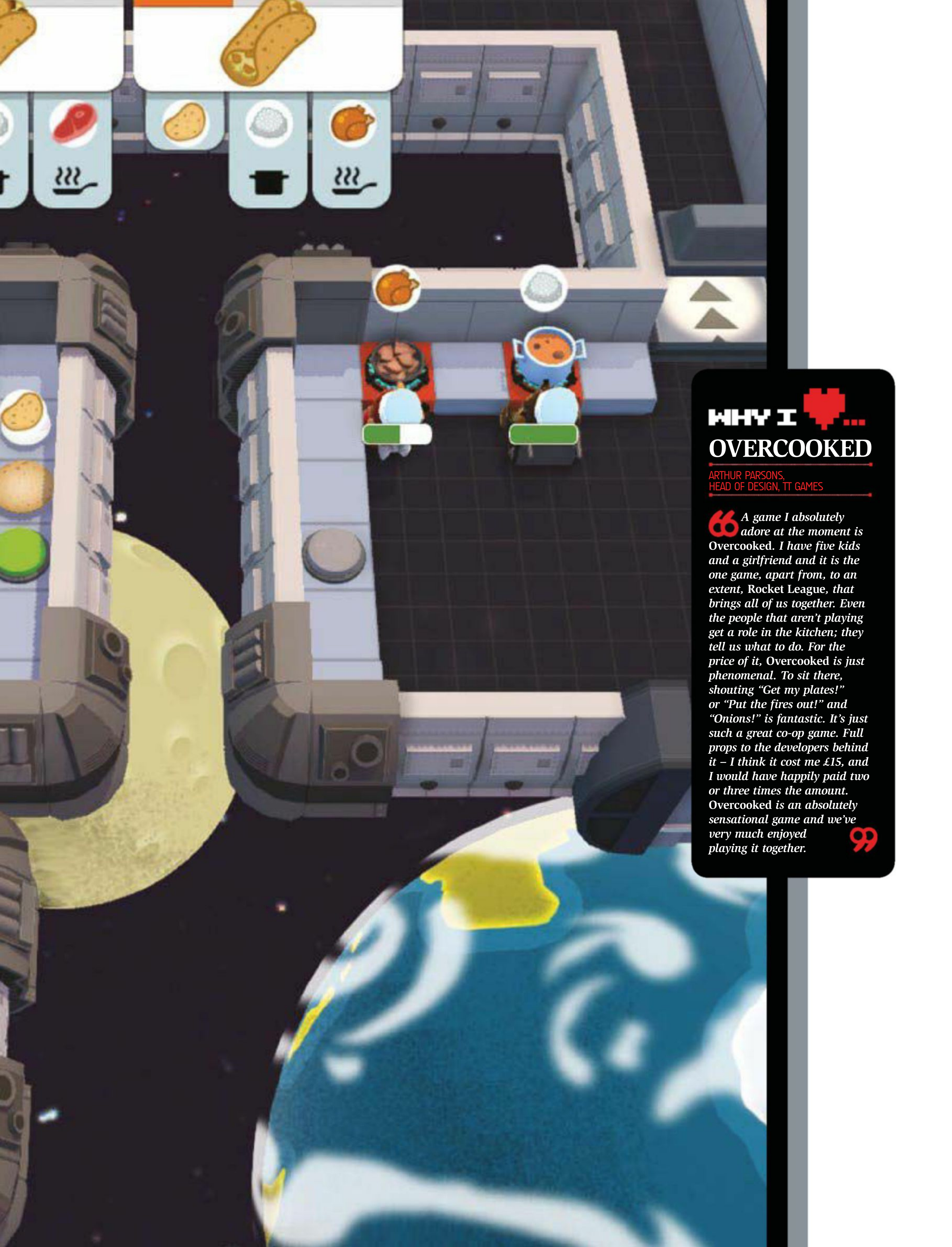
Above: The winner is the person who correctly guesses what everyone else picks and plays their jokes most strategically.





"It's the one game that brings all of us together"

ARTHUR PARSONS, HEAD OF DESIGN, TT GAMES



WHY I ♥...

OVERCOOKED

ARTHUR PARSONS,
HEAD OF DESIGN, TT GAMES

“*A game I absolutely adore at the moment is* **Overcooked**. *I have five kids and a girlfriend and it is the one game, apart from, to an extent,* **Rocket League**, *that brings all of us together. Even the people that aren't playing get a role in the kitchen; they tell us what to do. For the price of it,* **Overcooked** *is just phenomenal. To sit there, shouting "Get my plates!" or "Put the fires out!" and "Onions!" is fantastic. It's just such a great co-op game. Full props to the developers behind it – I think it cost me £15, and I would have happily paid two or three times the amount.* **Overcooked** *is an absolutely sensational game and we've very much enjoyed playing it together.*”

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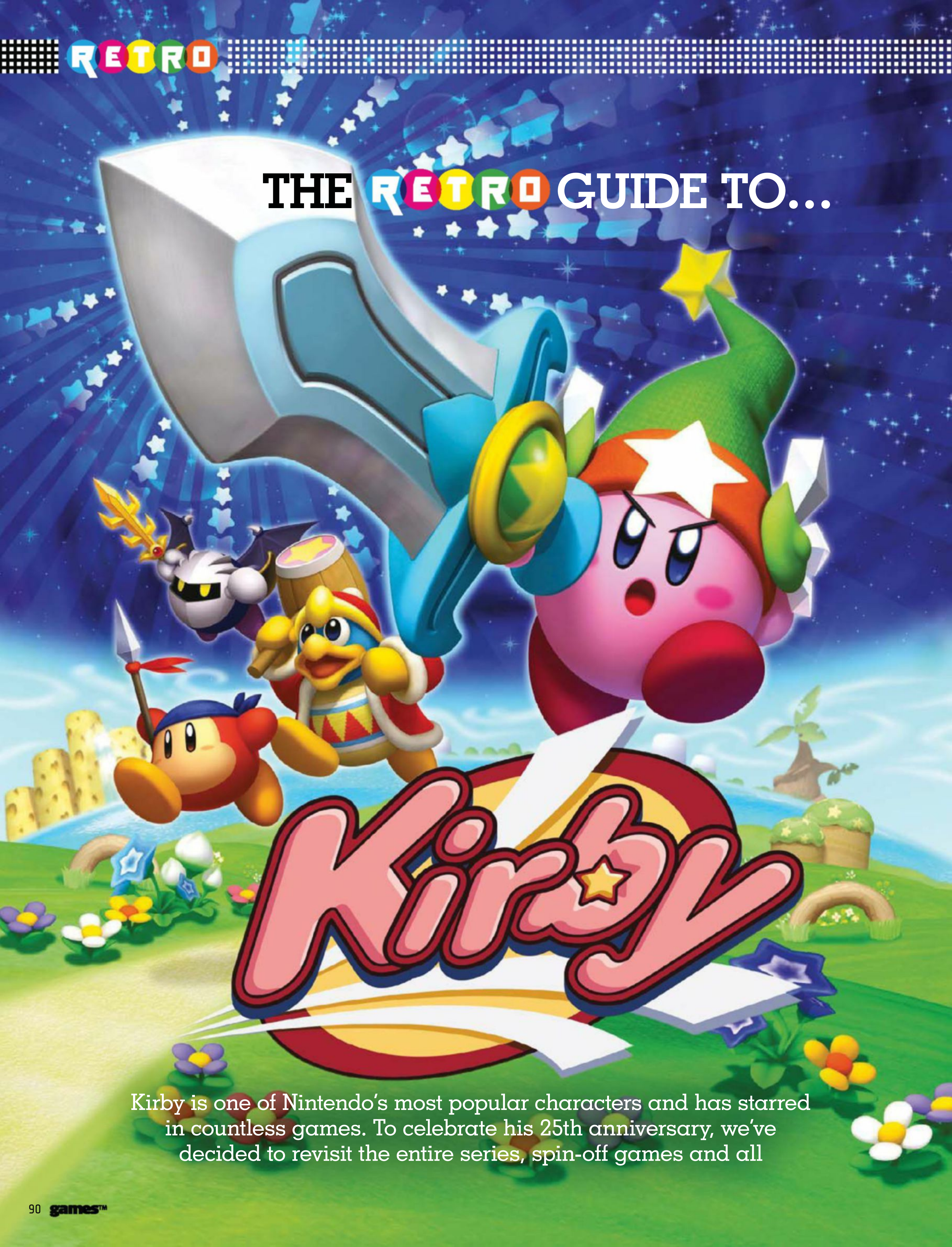
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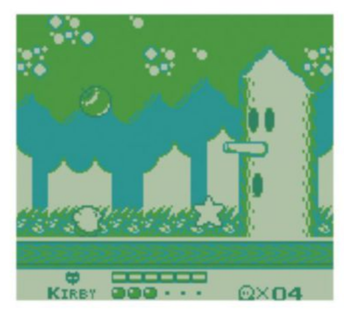
THE RETRO GUIDE TO…



Kirby is one of Nintendo's most popular characters and has starred in countless games. To celebrate his 25th anniversary, we've decided to revisit the entire series, spin-off games and all

CREATED BY MASAHIRO Sakurai when he was just 19 years old, Kirby is one of Nintendo's most popular characters. While many assumed that Kirby was a ghost due to the box art on the western release of *Kirby's Dream Land*, Sakurai always intended his lovable hero to be pink (Miyamto's first choice of yellow eventually became the second player default colour in the few multiplayer Kirby games that are available). With his games mainly developed by HAL Laboratory, Kirby has never really been a top-tier draw for Nintendo, but he's arguably been consistent and he's also appeared in some genuinely innovative games over the last 25 years and become a key member of the Super Smash Bros. series in the process. Here, we cover some of his best known, and most divisive games. How many did you play?

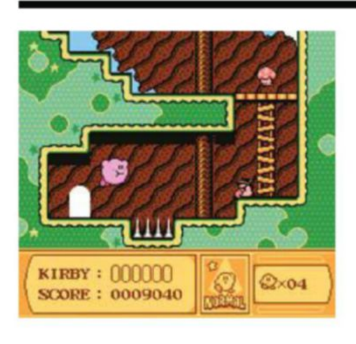




KIRBY'S DREAM LAND 1992

GAME BOY

Masahiro Sakurai's first Kirby game wasn't just a highly enjoyable Game Boy release – it also introduced many of the tropes that would go on to define the series. Kirby's ability to inhale enemies instantly made him stand apart from other videogame characters, while his ability to fly made it much easier to navigate the stages. *Dream Land* also introduced the concept of Warp Stars, recurring bosses like Whispy Woods and King Dedede (Kirby's equivalent of Bowser) and the charming dance he performs at the end of each stage. While relatively easy (flying lets you bypass many of the game's hazards) it is possible to unlock a harder difficulty, which makes things a little more challenging.



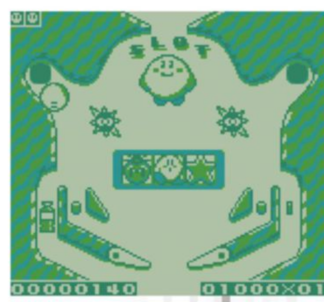


KIRBY'S ADVENTURE 1993

NES

Additional mechanics were introduced into Kirby's second game, many of which are still used today. Sakurai's lovable pink blob now had the ability to dash; he could pull off a handy slide attack and, perhaps most importantly, could now copy the abilities of certain enemies that he inhaled. This last mechanic dramatically changed the gameplay, making some areas of the game harder or easier depending on what you had equipped and allowing Kirby to do everything from use a sword to breathe fire. In addition to featuring numerous fun minigames and a large number of levels to plough through, *Kirby's Adventure* is also notable for introducing Meta Knight, an antihero who regularly pops up throughout the series. It remains a little too easy, but there's no denying it's a hell of a lot of fun.





KIRBY'S PINBALL LAND 1993

GAME BOY

Kirby's first spin-off is an excellent pinball game that still plays brilliantly today. There are three tables controlled by three classic Kirby bosses and each and every one of them is exceptionally well designed. It effortlessly incorporates classic Kirby tropes into the standard pinball gameplay and proved the versatility of HAL Laboratory's incredibly cute mascot.



KIRBY SPIN-OFFS

HAL Laboratory's mascot has made significant appearances in all manner of other games…

SUPER SMASH BROS.



Nintendo's unconventional four-player brawler stars Kirby, Mario, Link and many other classic Nintendo characters. Later games would greatly expand on the mechanics by introducing insane amounts of playable characters and all sorts of delicious unlockables, but there remains a purity to the original game that still makes it extremely satisfying to play today. It helps that Kirby is also extremely powerful and easily holds his own against the likes of Donkey Kong and Samus.

ULTIMATE NES REMIX



Originally released as two separate games on Wii U, this 3DS game features all sorts of challenges based around classic NES games, including *Super Mario Bros*, *Balloon Fight*, *Excitebike* and *Kirby's Adventure*. The challenges are typically timed and range from defeating an enemy in a certain amount of time, to clearing a stage without dying. While the 3DS game features fewer overall games it does feature a faster-paced version of *Super Mario Bros*.

NINTENDO BADGE ARCADE



This charming digital download for 3DS features a number of grabbing machines where you can attempt to capture badges covering a huge range of Nintendo franchises, including a large number of Kirby ones. Spending 90 pence will net you five goes, but you'll receive two free plays every day, with the chance to earn more in Practice mode. While Nintendo is no longer adding new badges, there's still plenty to collect.

KIRBY'S DREAM COURSE 1994

SNES



Kirby's first SNES game wasn't the best of starts for the cute fella. Conceptually the idea behind *Dream Course* is sound as if it's nothing more than a colourful take on crazy golf. Sadly, the execution is somewhat lacking. The player's aim is to defeat every on-screen enemy, which in turn will turn the last into a hole through which Kirby can escape. As a result, *Dream Course* offers a surprising amount of strategy because there are numerous ways to approach each stage. It's a pity, then, that it's let down by sluggish gameplay and some rather weak physics. An interesting curio that will appear on the SNES Mini.





KIRBY'S GHOST TRAP 1995

SNES

This is nothing more than a sneaky reskin of *Puyo Puyo* with a trash-talking version of Kirby. As with other versions of *Puyo Puyo* the aim is to line up Puyos to connect four or more of the same colour, hopefully stacking the little creatures in such a way that they will trigger additional chains that will send boulders across to your opponent on the other side of the screen. Also known as *Kirby's Avalanche*, it's an amazing game, particularly when played competitively.



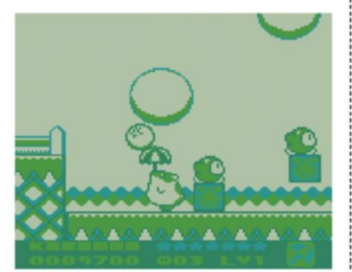


KIRBY'S DREAM LAND 2 1995

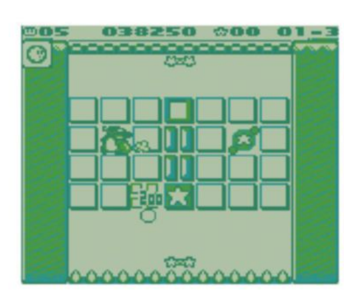
GAME BOY

Clearly feeling that its franchise wasn't saccharinely cute enough, HAL Laboratory added an extra dollop of sweetness in the form of three animal helpers that would aid Kirby as he navigated Dream Land. Rick the hamster, Coo the owl and Kine the fish are not only delightful to look at, but also augment Kirby's copy abilities in a number of useful ways. Like many Game Boy games at the time, it was due a DX upgrade to the Game Boy Color, but was eventually cancelled.









KIRBY'S BLOCK BALL 1995

GAME BOY

Created in collaboration with Nintendo Research & Development 1, *Kirby's Block Ball* is a refreshing take on *Breakout* that should make every Game Boy owner forget the risible *Alleyway* that helped launch the system. Each single stage screen not only features a number of increasingly complex block configurations, but also adds numerous mechanics that capture the spirit of Kirby. Unique power-ups let Kirby interact with otherwise indestructible blocks, while there's a wealth of minigames and secrets to discover. It even features some entertaining boss encounters. It's downside? It's a little too easy.

KIRBY'S TOY BOX 1996

SUPER FAMICOM SATELLAVIEW

Kirby games don't really tend to get more obscure than this little oddity. Not only was it confined to Japan, but it was exclusively available on Nintendo's Satellaview system, the company's first available download service. There are eight games in total: Baseball, Pinball, Balls Round And Round, Star Break, Arranging Balls, Cannonball, Bally Rally, Pachinko and they all revolve around very limited activities, from guiding Kirby through an obstacle course to an interesting take on *Scorched Earth* and *Worms*. They're quite simplistic-looking for Super Famicom releases, but that's to be expected considering the archaic download infrastructure that was in place at the time. They're also incredibly hard to find now as they could only be downloaded during specific broadcast times.







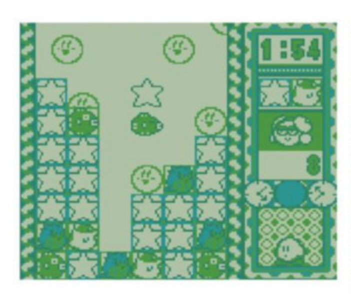


KIRBY'S FUN PACK 1996

SNES

This delightful collection of eight minigames is widely regarded to be one of the franchise's best games. The charming collection includes an aesthetically improved (but smaller) version of Dream Land called Spring Breeze as well as the excellent Gourmet Race, which pits you in a frantic food collecting dash against King Dedede. It's also notable for introducing Helpers (which can be controlled by the AI or a second player) and adding hats for Kirby that better highlight his current copy ability.





KIRBY STAR STACKER 1997

GAME BOY

The aim of this entertaining puzzler is to clear a set number of stars by sandwiching them between two matching blocks (based on Kirby's animal friends from *Dream Land 2*). *Star Stacker* features four distinct modes. Round Clear is the base game spread across several difficulty levels, VS lets you play against another player off a single cartridge, Challenge is effectively an endless mode, while Time Attack gives you three minutes to clear as many stars as possible.

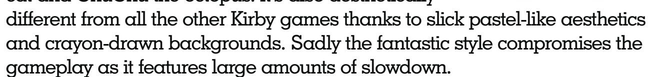




KIRBY'S DREAM LAND 3 1997

SNES

Released after the launch of the N64, many gamers missed out on the third *Dream Land* game. While it forgoes many of the mechanics that were introduced in *Kirby's Fun Pack*, it does add several new animal friends that aid Kirby in his quest, including Nago the cat and ChuChu the octopus. It's also aesthetically different from all the other Kirby games thanks to slick pastel-like aesthetics and crayon-drawn backgrounds. Sadly the fantastic style compromises the gameplay as it features large amounts of slowdown.







KIRBY 64: THE CRYSTAL SHARDS 2000

N64

Where *Mario* and *Zelda* broke exciting new ground on the N64, Kirby was simply content to appear in a capable platformer. The biggest change to the gameplay is that Kirby can now inhale two copy abilities and combine them to create even more powerful attacks. The downside though is that the pink blob is no longer able to fly for indefinite amounts of time.



THE KIRBY COLLECTOR

Matt Fisher tells us about his love for the pink blob

When did you first start collecting Kirby games?

I missed Kirby the first time around. I never had a NES or SNES growing up and when you're a kid you don't always have a huge amount of games. I discovered *Kirby's Adventure* and then went back to play the Game Boy games. I soon realised that there wasn't really such a thing as a bad Kirby game and it went from there.

What is it that you like about the character?

You don't mess with Kirby. He may be loveable and cute but he can take on any enemy – anyone who's played *Smash Bros* will know that.

What separates Kirby games from other platformers?

Kirby games are easy to pick up and fairly easy to play – that's how they were designed. But with a lot of the games there's a way of making it more challenging if you're a more seasoned gamer.

What's the rarest game in your collection?

Most Kirby games are fairly accessible. As some of the games were late releases on certain consoles then they can be uncommon, which keeps the value but they're still affordable. It's the boxes and manuals that are usually harder to find. When you've got an uncommon game that came in a cardboard box (which rarely survives in good condition), that's where the money is. While it's maybe not the rarest, I'm proud of my complete in-box copy of *Kirby's Dreamland 2*. Finding a copy that's in good shape and includes the additional Super Game Boy supplement isn't easy.

Why do you have multiple versions of the same game?

Sometimes I like to have the Japanese and the Western version of each game, I also have multiple versions of manuals in different languages. My wife is multilingual and we want our (future) kids to be too. I want to be able to play these games with them but help them learn languages at the same time.

Are there any games you're currently missing?

The only physical cartridge I'm missing is *Kirby No KiraKira Kids* on the Super Famicom. It was a console release of the *Kirby Star Stacker* Game Boy game that was exclusive to Japan. Other than that I've got all of them, minus a few boxes and manuals.

One that I may never find would probably be *Kirby's Toy Box*. It's a series of minigames that were released in Japan to promote *Kirby Super Deluxe*. To find an official copy, I'd have to find a Satellaview cart with the games saved on it. Four of the missing games were found last year but there's still some that are lost.

Do you collect any other sort of Kirby memorabilia?

There's obviously the amiibo and plushies but there's a few T-shirts, magazine ads, bath soaps etc.

What's the best main Kirby game and why?

I think most people would say *Kirby Super Star* (or *Kirby's Fun Pack*) but for me it's *Planet Robobot*. It's such a fun game but it also has nods to loads of classic Game Boy platformers as well. There's a big poster of it waiting to be hung in my studio.

Why do you think so many Kirby games have been released on handhelds?

Kirby is one of those games that will probably always be best played as a 2D platformer. While there have been great games on consoles, the experience just feels better on a handheld. The pick-up-and-play nature of it just seems to feel right on a handheld – also the 3DS games were among the rare games that actually made you want to turn on the 3D effects.





KIRBY TILT 'N' TUMBLE 2001

GAME BOY COLOR

This is probably one of the most experimental and innovative games in Kirby's repertoire. Released in a clear pink translucent casing, accelerometers are used to roll Kirby around the cleverly designed courses searching for stars, while avoiding holes, bumpers and other annoying hazards. Jerking the Game Boy Color will launch Kirby in the air, transforming enemies into stars, clocks or pep brews, depending on how many times the player uses the move. There are also mini shoot-'em-up stages where Kirby flies and takes down UFOs. A planned sequel for the GameCube that would use the GBA as a controller was eventually cancelled.





KIRBY NIGHTMARE IN DREAMLAND 2002

GAME BOY ADVANCE

This enchanting-looking GBA release is essentially an enhanced update of the original NES Kirby adventure. It replaces the original sub games with new ones, lowers the difficulty of the game, introduces hats for many of Kirby's copy abilities and changes how some of the copy abilities work. While the level design and enemy layout is mostly intact, small tweaks have been made in certain sections. While its difficulty is rather disappointing, completing Extra mode allows you to play as Meta Knight, who only has three energy bars, relies on a sword instead of copy abilities and cannot save at any time.





KIRBY AIR RIDE 2003

GAMECUBE

This spin-off is one of the most divisive games in Kirby's library due to its seemingly simplistic control system. Sharing similarities with the sub-game Kirby Grind from *Nightmare In Dreamland*, the aim is to race through the colourful locations of Dream Land as quickly as possible. Braking, charging your boost bar and inhaling nearby enemies is all handled by the A button, while the analogue stick is used to steer. Mastering boosting does take a while to get to grips with, but once it clicks, Air Ride proves itself to be a surprisingly complex little racing game that offers plenty of replay value. In total there are three modes to choose from: Air Ride, which is basic racing, Top Ride, which is viewed from above and utilises far smaller tracks and City Trial, which is a highly impressive campaign mode with lots of secrets to discover.

KIRBY & THE AMAZING MIRROR 2004

GAME BOY ADVANCE

While it retains the platform elements of earlier games, the last GBA Kirby title riffs heavily off the Metroidvania template and is far less linear than other releases in the series. It also greatly spices things up by introducing three Kirby helpers that our hero can call on his mobile, who offer support as our hero searches for the eight mirror fragments that should restore order to his world.





TOUCH! KIRBY 2005

NINTENDO DS

Kirby's first DS adventure is unlike any that came before it. The player uses the stylus to draw lines for Kirby to travel across, change his direction and it's possible to stun enemies by touching them. Additionally, touching Kirby causes him to dash forward (destroying any stunned enemies he hits) or activate any copy abilities he might currently have. The fun sub-games also make extensive use of the stylus.

KIRBY: MOUSE ATTACK 2006

NINTENDO DS

After the creativity of *Touch! Kirby*, Kirby's second DS adventure is a far more standard affair. Pitting Kirby against the Squeak Squad (the title it goes by in America) Kirby's goal is to retrieve a large number of treasure chests, which typically house keys to secret levels and worlds. One new addition to the series is that Kirby can inhale items encased in bubbles and store them in his stomach, which can then be combined to create more powerful items.



KIRBY'S EPIC YARN 2010

WII

Created by Good Feel, this remains one of the best-looking games on the Wii thanks to its distinctive yarn-based aesthetic. It's also one of the most interesting Kirby games as the little tyke can no longer inhale enemies or fly. Instead, he relies on a trusty whip that can unravel enemies and the ability to transform into several different forms, including a top, parachute, train and rocket. Constantly inventive and with a fun two-player mode, Kirby's first Wii adventure is epic.









KIRBY MASS ATTACK 2011

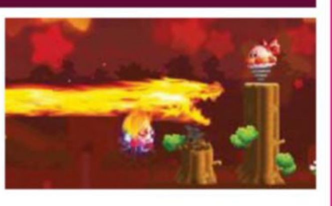
NINTENDO DS

This is another innovative Kirby game that makes exceptional use of the DS stylus and has you controlling a small army of ten Kirbys. You can fling them about the screen to attack enemies, solve puzzles and generally cause all sorts of mayhem. Boss encounters are well executed and require clever tactics to destroy them, while the presentation and visuals are some of the best the series has seen. It's wonderfully accessible too, and you'll soon be flinging your cute army about with wild abandonment.

KIRBY'S ADVENTURE WII 2011

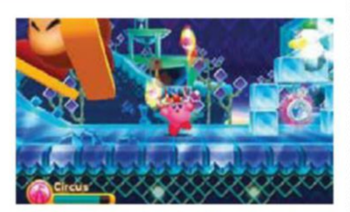
WII

Kirby's final Wii adventure is as conventional as they come, but still manages to be an excellent outing for Nintendo's mascot and even introduces four-player multiplayer. In addition to introducing four new copy abilities, Kirby can also access insanely powerful Super Abilities that can take out multiple enemies. He can also use a Super Inhale ability to suck up multiple enemies and objects at once.









KIRBY: TRIPLE DELUXE 2014

NINTENDO 3DS

New copy skills and the ability to jump between two planes are the main mechanics that separate *Triple Deluxe* from earlier Kirby games. Kirby can also become Hypernova Kirby by eating a miracle fruit that enables him to suck up gigantic objects like trees to solve puzzles or defeat large numbers of enemies. Interestingly, *Triple Deluxe*'s minigames, Dedede's Drum Dash and Kirby Fighters, proved popular enough to receive standalone upgraded download releases on Nintendo's eShop.

KIRBY AND THE RAINBOW CURSE 2015

WII U

While it takes clear influence from *Touch! Kirby*, Kirby's only Wii U release features little of its predecessor's creativity and plays out more as a basic score attack game. There's no denying that it's a stunning-looking game thanks to its distinctive clay aesthetic, but the continual focus on the Wii U's gamepad means you rarely get to appreciate them on your TV screen.



KIRBY PLANET ROBOBOT 2016

NINTENDO 3DS

The last physical release to currently feature Kirby is also one of his best games. In addition to adding several new copy abilities, Kirby can now commandeer gigantic mechs, which greatly change the gameplay and make it tremendously fun to play. Like *Triple Deluxe*, its minigames, Kirby Team Clash and Kirby's Blowout Blast, have also become standalone releases.





MORE KIRBY GAMES TO TRY

- ***KIRBY'S STAR STACKER*, 1997, SUPER FAMICOM**
- ***KIRBY SLIDE*, 2003, GAME BOY ADVANCE E-READER**
- ***KIRBY SUPER STAR ULTRA*, 2008, NINTENDO DS**
- ***3D CLASSICS: KIRBY'S ADVENTURE*, 2011, NINTENDO 3DS ESHOP**
- ***KIRBY'S DREAM COLLECTION: SPECIAL EDITION*, 2012, WII**
- ***KIRBY FIGHTER'S DELUXE*, 2014, NINTENDO 3DS ESHOP**
- ***DEDEDE'S DRUM DASH DELUXE*, 2014, NINTENDO 3DS ESHOP**
- ***TEAM KIRBY CLASH DELUXE*, 2017, NINTENDO 3DS ESHOP**
- ***KIRBY'S BLOWOUT BLAST*, 2017, NINTENDO 3DS ESHOP**
- ***KIRBY*, 2017, NINTENDO 3DS**
- ***KIRBY FOR NINTENDO SWITCH*, 2018, SWITCH**

BEHIND THE SCENES

IN COLD BLOOD

Blood, sweat and tears went into the making of Revolution Software's fourth attempt at creating fresh IP. Charles Cecil and Tony Warriner talk to games™ about their often-forgotten game



Released: 2000
Format: PlayStation, Windows
Publisher: SCEE, Ubisoft, DreamCatcher Games
Key Staff: Charles Cecil (director), Steve Ince (producer), Tony Warriner (System Design), Jake Turner (Technical Programming), Barrington Pheloung (music)

BY THE TIME *IN COLD BLOOD* HAD BEEN RELEASED, REVOLUTION SOFTWARE HAD CARVED OUT A SOLID REPUTATION AS A DEVELOPER OF SOME OF THE FINEST POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE GAMES. It had released its debut, *Lure Of The Temptress*, in 1992 and it had followed it up with the dystopian sci-fi classic *Beneath A Steel Sky* two years later. More importantly, it had created not one but two Broken Sword adventures in 1996 and 1997, giving the genre a major shot in the arm as players flocked to enjoy the adventures of George Stobbart and Nico Collard.

Yet from that point, there had been an unusual lull in the development of their trademark games. "Publishers had decided that 2D point-and-click adventures were dead and they weren't commissioning them anymore," explains Revolution's founder Charles Cecil. "They wanted 3D visceral games for the PlayStation." That was despite healthy sales for the first Broken Sword, *The Shadow Of The Templars*, which had sold 600,000 copies on the PlayStation and in spite of similar success for the sequel, *The Smoking Mirror*. "We were just in an era when you could sell a game if you said it had slightly more polygons," Cecil adds.

All of this meant that if Revolution was to survive in this pre-indie era when development costs were soaring month after month, it had to adapt and follow the crowd to some extent. It worked on projects for other companies – *Disney's Story Studio: Disney's Mulan* was released in 1998 – but such a move wasn't to everyone's taste. Dave Cummins, who had worked on every Revolution game up to that point, left the company on the basis that he'd return to the company if it started to develop point-and-click adventures again.

But thanks to a strong relationship with Sony, Cecil was entirely confident that he and the rest of his team could stride forward in this new 3D, action-obsessed era. "We were looking at how to move the point-and-click genre across and continue writing attractive stories," he says. "So we started to look at putting an adventure within an action game, one which would put the player under pressure while ensuring that the main challenge didn't come from the action. The idea was that we'd add a degree of strategy and a degree of jeopardy and we pitched this to Sony. The team there got very excited and the company went ahead and commissioned the game."



The game's introduction was jaw-dropping, showcasing the abilities of the PlayStation at a time when the PS2 was about to turn heads.

Revolution had initially considered making Broken Sword its first 3D title. It would have made sense given the appetite for a third game in the franchise. Had the developer gone down that path, it would have been released around the same time as *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood Of The Sacred, Blood Of The Damned* for which Sierra On-Line had used a rendered 3D engine in its bid to keep the series relevant to ever-changing modern audiences.

WE STARTED TO LOOK AT PUTTING AN ADVENTURE WITHIN AN ACTION GAME

"I'm glad we didn't," explains Cecil. "Clearly the technology was way behind what the audience expected. With Broken Sword, gamers were used to lush 2D animation and backgrounds and for that game the narrative, characters and empathy was very important. If we had moved to 3D with Broken Sword at that point, the technology wouldn't have allowed us to create that player empathy." It is why Revolution decided to create entirely fresh IP as it pushed towards a release of what became *In Cold Blood* in 2000.

The story came first. Set in the near future in a fictional, newly independent state called Volgia – located on the east coast of Russia – the game starred an M16 agent called John Cord who players met as he was being tortured by a ruthless dictator called Dmitri Nagarov.

It transpired that Russia had wanted to regain control of Nagarov's resource-rich nation and had called on military assistance from China. Yet their efforts were being



Although the detailed pre-rendered backgrounds were stunning, the control system was fiddly, which put off many players.

Charles Cecil says he regrets forcing players to crouch at the start of *In Cold Blood* because it meant their introduction to the game was far from gentle.



It may secretly desire to be the next Metal Gear Solid but it's not half as entertaining or action-packed. It may be attractively cinematic but as the next generation of adventure game, it doesn't make a name for itself

PC Zone, 2000

scuppered by a US-funded resistance movement in Volgia headed up by Gregor Kostov – and to make matters worse, this group had heard the Volgians had developed some special technology, prompting the Americans to send a spy called Kiefer to investigate. When Kiefer went missing, the US asked Britain for help. Cord was then sent to try and find out what was going on.

"I kicked off the basics of the story and then Neil Richards worked with me on it before writing the script," recalls Cecil of the creation of the game's unravelling, complex plot. The hope was that players would watch the bold opening and then be driven with anticipation to discover how and why Cord ended up in his predicament. To do this, Revolution decided to use flashbacks as a central theme. "This, along with the scenarios – the spy story and so on – gave us something different from the Broken Swords that came before," says programmer Tony Warriner, who co-founded Revolution with Cecil.

IF YOU ASKED THEM WHETHER IT WAS DIFFICULT, THEY WOULD SAY ABSOLUTELY

The use of flashbacks presented the team with a challenge, though. What if Cord died as players made their made through one of his recollections? Surely that would mean he couldn't be telling his story further down the line? The solution was clever. "My idea was that if Cord died in the game, then he would say it couldn't have happened that way and you'd go back to the start of the memory," Cecil explains. "It was my way of smoothing over the suspension of disbelief when a character dies."

With that in place, the game could then be built around the story. "The design evolved slowly around a number of ideas," begins Warriner. In order to progress, though, an entirely new game engine had to be built. "This was driven by the PlayStation being the lead platform." There was also no available middleware that could suit the style of game they wanted to create.

Jake Turner, who had worked on *Disney's Story Studio: Disney's Mulan* after a spell at the Ministry of Defence, took on the role of technical programmer and, together with Andrew Boskett who joined later, worked hard on producing the engine. "It was one hell of a feat; a very ambitious project," Cecil states. "If you asked them whether it was difficult, they would say absolutely." The developers removed any notion of a detached point-and-click interface and they replaced it with a game that involved real-time action.

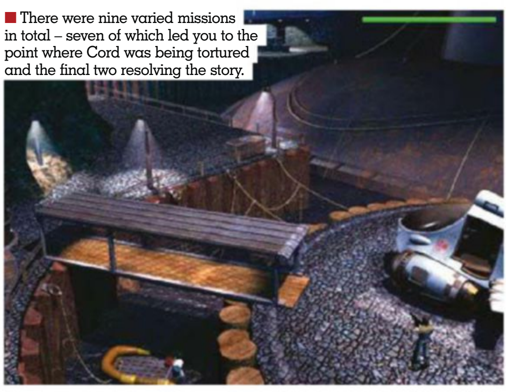
They retained an abundance of logical puzzles from Broken Sword, though. Cecil had come to believe that the point-and-click adventure genre had been suffering thanks to developers infusing their games with silly, illogical obstacles that sought to baffle seasoned adventurers who had become used to the grammar of such games. This was frustrating point-and-click's core fanbase so, as tempting as Cecil admits it was to come

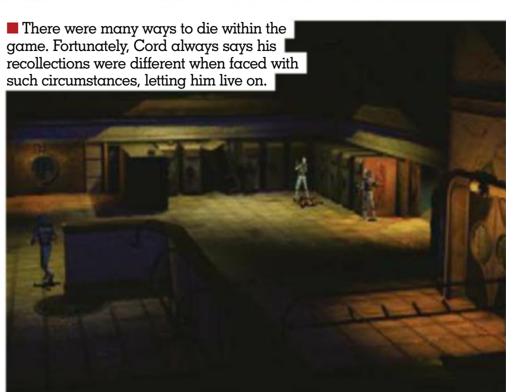
up with off-beat puzzles, he decided against challenging players in such a way.

Instead, he looked towards making a game that was primarily about stealth but also about shooting; one which contained action-based puzzles. It meant gamers had to think about when to fire and when to sneak, knowing that one false move could get them killed. The use of stealth had been popularised by Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid*, which sold more than six million copies on the PlayStation. Highly acclaimed and a good example of how a game genre could be updated for modern audiences (the original *Metal Gear* had been released in 1987 for the MSX2 computer), it would certainly have been an ideal game from which to draw inspiration.

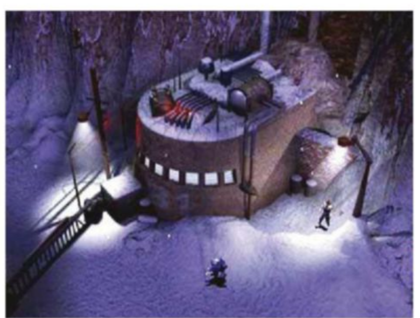
Yet rather than purely drive the narrative forward with non-interactive sequences, *In Cold Blood* required the player to explore the environment, interact with characters and overcome obstacles. "I think the stealth worked more or less okay," concludes Warriner. "We approached the puzzles in the same way as we did with the adventures, and because the scenario and so on were content rich, we had a lot to work with." The approach taken by Revolution felt different to *MGS* and it marked the game out, helping to avoid overly direct comparisons with other titles.

Indeed, Cecil never cited Kojima or indeed Metal Gear's main character, Solid Snake, as his muse in any of the interviews he gave about the game. He preferred to talk of being inspired by the movies *Pulp Fiction*, *The Usual Suspects* and *Heat* (Cecil was always reluctant to go along with comparisons between Cord and James Bond, too). He wanted his latest game to feel as cinematic as possible, both in the playing around of time – hence why the game started two-thirds of the way through and had flashbacks – and in its visual style. It was no accident, then, that he turned to Bob Keen, who had worked on the


There were nine varied missions in total – seven of which led you to the point where Cord was being tortured and the final two resolving the story.


There were many ways to die within the game. Fortunately, Cord always says his recollections were different when faced with such circumstances, letting him live on.





MEET THE CAST

REVOLUTION'S NARRATIVE-DRIVEN GAMES HAVE ALWAYS CONTAINED STRONG CHARACTERS – BUT WAS THAT THE CASE WITH IN COLD BLOOD?



JOHN CORD

Voiced by Nickolas Grace and born to a ruthless, domineering British Army officer, *In Cold Blood*'s protagonist John Cord was a MI6 agent loyal to his boss Alpha. While this inevitably invited unwanted comparisons to James Bond – Charles Cecil insisted Ian Fleming's character was not an inspiration – it also meant Cord had a particular set of skills. Adept at survival and able to dispatch enemies with a single blow, he was a sharp shooter and a good puzzle solver (all with your help, of course). For all of that, though, he lacked the dry wit and sarcasm of Broken Sword's George Stobbart or *Beneath A Steel Sky*'s Joey, making him markedly more forgettable.

GREGOR KOSTOV

With a strong voice not unlike that of Brian Blessed, bear-like Kostov was the leader of the Volgian Freedom Fighters. Big on personality, this charismatic, this helpful man was voiced by Constantine Gregory and Cord came into contact with him early on, later encountering him at important moments in the game.

DMITRI NAGAROV

Just as in James Bond (there's that comparison again), the villains within *In Cold Blood* tended to stand out the most. Voice artist David Calder brought this cold, evil force to life in the most superb of manners, ensuring Volgia's dictator was a fellow to fear from the very start.



CHI-LING CHEUNG

Born in Hong Kong to a pro-Britain mother and pro-China father, Cheung was a secret agent for the External Security Section of The People's Republic of China, working as a double agent for Nagarov. She was rather underdeveloped as a character, though, and she often appeared like magic by Cord's side.

ALPHA

Alpha was a high-ranking MI6 officer and Cord's boss (inviting those James Bond comparisons again). Strong and something of a mother figure for Cord, she was perfectly voiced by Patricia Hodge. It offered an entirely different, professional relationship to that of the duos who had roamed Revolution's previous games.



special effects of films such as *Hellraiser III: Hell On Earth*.

"Bob was based at Pinewood Studios and he had become well known for creating the masks and a lot of the special effects for the film," says Cecil. "I can't remember how or why I met him, but he was excited about videogames and we teamed up. He worked on the storyboards and the sequences, almost as an art director, and we were able to tap into his 3D experience. He advised us about the look of the backgrounds and his team created some of the cut scenes as well. It was a very valuable relationship."

The game was able to push the abilities of the PlayStation. It had detailed pre-rendered backgrounds and the polygons of the characters were ray traced, with shadows cast realistically. "The visual style was a happy outcome from the tech," adds Warriner. "The idea was always to develop a 3D sprite while retaining our high-detail adventure-style backgrounds, and the obvious route was to use 3D modelling to create the backgrounds so that the 3D sprite – or model as it turned out – would fit properly. Of course, until real-time 3D games, we had no polygonal limit to our pre-rendered backgrounds and so our artists had no restrictions. The backgrounds were visually rich as a result."

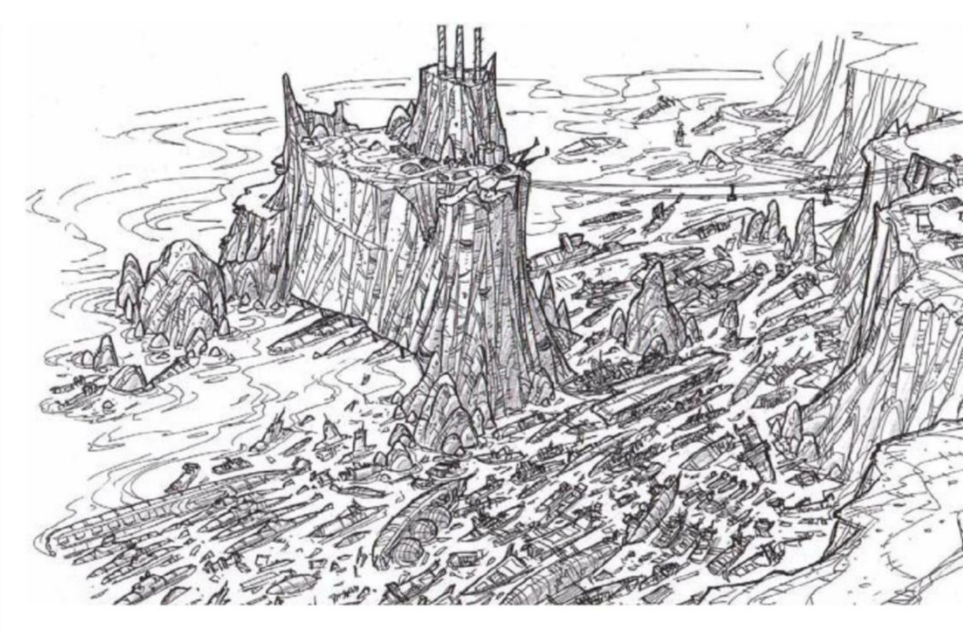
There were also many neat gaming mechanisms. A few of these were borrowed from other sources and were made necessary by the move away from the point-and-click interface that Revolution was used to. In its previous games, for example, a usable object would be highlighted when moving the cursor around the screen, but in *In Cold Blood* useful objects would be highlighted by having Cord turn to look at them. It would give the player an instant visual clue that there was something of interest nearby, but it was nevertheless a mechanism ripped from *Grim Fandango*. The game also looked to other games in borrowing the technique of cutting in close to a location or giving players a better view of something Cord was looking at.

All of this helped to drive the narrative forward in a cinematic way. The well-written script with its often witty lines ("Fire away," says a technician, before quickly adding, "Figure of speech! Figure of speech!") were brought to life by the voice artists. Nickolas Grace lent his tones to John Cord, for instance, while Patricia Hodge, who became much loved as Penny in the comedy series *Miranda*, played a blinder by voicing Alpha. David Calder did a particularly superb job with Nagarov, ensuring he appeared dark and sinister throughout. Calder went on to play a role in the entirely unrelated ITV television series *Cold Blood* that was first broadcast in 2005, but his work in the game will be remembered forever. As with Broken Sword before it, the game's outstanding orchestral score was created by the Austrian composer Barrington Pheloung who, to many, was best known for the theme and incidental music to the *Inspector Morse* television series. His music added to the emotion of the game and it also gave it a stirring send off thanks to a fabulous end credit song sung by Pat Treacy. "That element was always going to be epic," says Warriner.

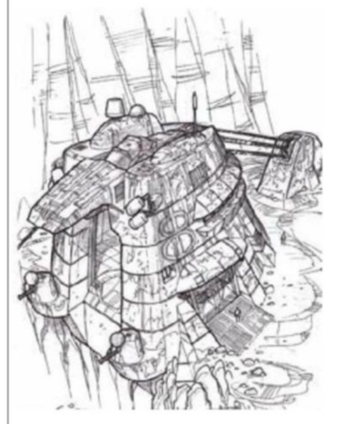
Even so, Cecil wasn't entirely happy. In hindsight, he felt the game was too ambitious for the PlayStation since some of the 400 cameras ended up being pulled too far back at times and the characters looked pixellated. The user interface was also clunky, so while critics praised the use of interrogation and the way you could threaten characters to dish the dirt, they scorned the way the gun sometimes homed in on a less appropriate target and they became frustrated at hindering mini-robots, which were tricky to get past.

"We mishandled the UI and the action itself was not a great success," admits Warriner, "so we missed an opportunity to do something groundbreaking that, for us, would have been a nice adventure game in a non-adventure scenario. The controls became the game's biggest problem."

They certainly did. The controls made moving through the nine missions of the game unintentionally frustrating at times. Even though gamers had a burning

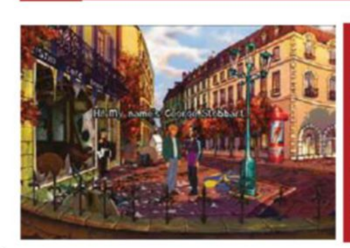


■ This pre-production sketch shows an overview of the Arctic Base that was later brought to life in fine, colourful detail in the game.



■ Cord is able to get to the top of the tower with Chi's help and activate a cable car as he heads to an island.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Broken Sword > In Cold Blood > Broken Age

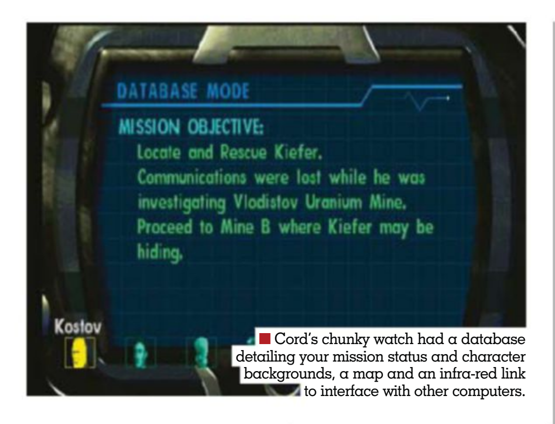


Broken Sword was Revolution's finest hour. The developer took inspiration from its dialogue and plotted narrative for *In Cold Blood*.



More recently, Tim Schafer's point-and-click *Broken Age* has shown just how well 3D can work within the popular genre.





Cord's chunky watch had a database detailing your mission status and character backgrounds, a map and an infra-red link to interface with other computers.



desire to explore the game's 100-plus locations – albeit linearly – in practice it wasn't always that easy as you tried to move the character face-forward before heading that way often under pressure. "It made the game difficult to play," Cecil admits, adding that the situation was made worse by an unforgiving start to the game.

For those who have never played it, the beginning of *In Cold Blood* requires players to strike up a conversation with Gregor Kostov in order to ask him to create a diversion. You are meant to follow him as he distracts the guard by offering cigarettes. At this point – and in order to avoid being shot dead before reaching a door – you need to crouch and edge your way past. This was by no means obvious and so many players ended up dying over and over, which surely caused many to give up.

"I am really embarrassed that we made the player crouch at the beginning. It was a stupid decision," Cecil explains. "It was absolutely mine and very naïve, but games were designed very differently then to the way they are now. Today, people expect, quite rightly, to be taught the control system slowly rather than be punished if they haven't read the manual." It is something that, were he to remake the game at any point, he would immediately rectify.

"I think in hindsight we could probably have done a better job, but we had a small team and we ran out of time and money," he says. "Had it been a bigger team with a big budget I am sure we would have had more time to finesse some of these aspects. The control system in an environment in which the background was rendered and the characters in real-time was always going to be quite tough, though."

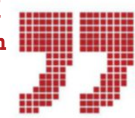
Even so, it posed a challenge and anyone who made it through the ten hours or so of gameplay couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment (finish and players were rewarded by a slideshow of conceptual art, profiles of ten characters and the opportunity to play any of the missions again). "Sony got very excited and put a lot of marketing behind the game," says Cecil. "But while *In Cold Blood* got stunning reviews at one end, it got slammed at the other." He contends, though, that he wouldn't have liked it other way.

"I don't want to write games that are mediocre," he tells us. "I would rather write a game that some people love and some people hate than one that everyone collectively agrees is just okay. For me, *In Cold Blood* was a brave attempt to try and redefine the adventure genre and while it was limited in that regard, it allowed us to move on with Broken Sword, which we were able to take into 3D and which was very well received."

I AM PRETTY PROUD OF WHAT I CAME UP WITH

He certainly sees *In Cold Blood* as an important title in the history of Revolution Software. "It is very much part of the canon. We haven't produced that many different franchises so we are proud of it," he says. It went on to sell around 300,000 copies following its launch in 2000 and it got an airing on the PC the following year once the exclusivity period with Sony ended, allowing DreamCatcher Interactive to publish it.

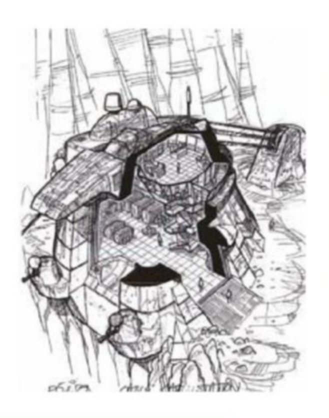
It has since been re-released on **www.gog.com** where it has been doing rather well and Revolution still gets emails discussing the title, asking if there would ever be a sequel. Realistically that's not about to happen any time soon since Revolution has been hard at work dusting off some of its more popular titles (Broken Sword benefitted from a hugely successful Kickstarter which saw it return in 2013). But how would Cecil sum up his often-overlooked game? "I am pretty proud of what I came up with," he tells us, pausing. "But there could be no doubt that it could have been better."



WHAT THEY SAID...

The most ambitious PlayStation game yet. In Cold Blood pushes what used to be called the adventure into brave, new, exciting and cinematic territory

Official UK PlayStation Magazine, 2000



THE BLOOD CIRCLE

Could the game have worked as a point-and-click?

ALTHOUGH *IN COLD Blood* marked Revolution's intention to move away from the point-and-click genre, it didn't stop Tony Warriner from trying to recreate the game as an old-style adventure last year. "I had a crack at reworking the game as a pure mouse-driven point-and-click game," he explains. "I pretty much had it working, although it was going to be quite a lot of work to bring the underlying data into shape and working with a point-and-click user interface."

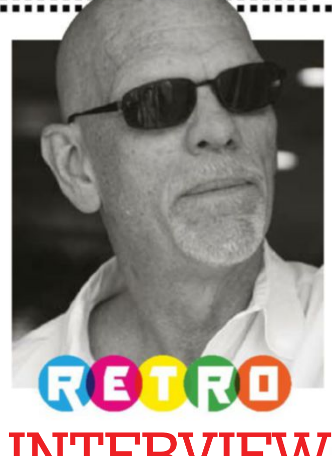


The project wasn't pursued – a "real shame", he says. "I guess at the back of my mind, a UI reboot of the original game would have made a follow-up more of a possibility after such a long time since the original game."



FALL OF CIVILIZATION

"It didn't seem like [the original *Civilization*] was going to be a big thing to me. It was such a big topic and such a grand idea, and for me, when I then saw it on the screen in actual working order, it didn't satisfy my expectations because graphics just could not do it. I really enjoyed playing the game, but I couldn't see how it could be a big hit because it did not look like it needed to. The world didn't look like a world, it was all these squares, a lot of bright colours."



INTERVIEW
JEFF BRIGGS

He made his name during the glory days of MicroProse before going on to co-found Firaxis. **games™** speaks with the composer, producer and designer of some of the company's best titles

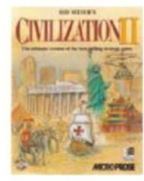
SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Sword Of The Samurai
[1989]
Composer



Knights Of The Sky
[1990]
Designer



Civilization II
[1996]
Lead designer and composer



YOU STUDIED MUSIC but ended up moving into videogames. How did that happen?

I graduated and moved to New York City with my fiancé and she was going to study at the Columbia University. I was going to look for music and teaching jobs. I got a few offers but they weren't very good offers, and so I found an ad in the *New York Times* for a game design position for a company called West End Games, which was a wargame board game company. I had been playing wargames for several years before, and so I thought it might be an interesting way to make some money on the side and so I applied and got that job.

So how did you ultimately come to work for MicroProse?

I was there for four years, and I got a call from MicroProse software in about 1988, and they offered me a job as a games designer. A little funny story there is that at the time that I was talking to them on the phone about this job, my wife – she had become my wife at that point – had come downstairs with a positive pregnancy test, and I was like, 'Oh my God!' and I told the guy who had called me, Arnold Hendrick – he was one of the original MicroProse game designers. Anyway, I told him: 'Look, I'm just going to have to wait' – we didn't know she was pregnant beforehand – 'we're just going to have to figure all this out'. So I asked him to call me back in about three months, [as] we should have had it figured out by then. On the three-month anniversary they called back, and this time it was Steve Meyer. So I accepted the job, I thought there might be some music in my future by working in computer games rather than board games, so it seemed like a good switch.

> **WE ALL FELT A PART OF SOMETHING KIND OF NEW AND DIFFERENT, WE WEREN'T JUST A GAMES COMPANY, WE WERE A LAB**

Once you had started at MicroProse, what were your initial tasks? Was it purely as a game designer or were you also making music for the games you were working on?

I was hired as a designer. The music thing I sort of kept under my hat for a while because I was unsure of what they would need. So my first project there – this was kind of weird – they wanted me to design a board game based on *F-19* because that game had just come out, and they thought, 'Let's franchise this, we'll do a board game'. And so I worked on that for about six months until I convinced Steve that it wasn't a very good idea, and he agreed that it probably wasn't a really good idea. And the thing about the *F-19* game, and any stealth fighter game, is that it's really a single-player experience because your opponents in a stealth fighter game are NPC aeroplanes or radar stations, so it's really difficult to find an opponent who wants to be a radar station. So they moved me over to

doing more versions of *F-19*. For about my first year at MicroProse I was the king of porting games from PC to other platforms, basically.

What kind of expectations were you hoping to get out of this position? Was it a career you were looking for?

Well, for me, being a musician and still wanting to be a musician, I think I was viewing every job I had – including games – as day jobs to support my habit, you know? I have to say, I never really viewed any of this as a career until I guess probably about five or six years into it. I started to see it as something I could excel at. I could really make something, I thought.

You couldn't really call it an industry at the time, it was still very young – how did it feel to you? Was there a sense of excitement about the work or did it seem like you were in a niche field?

I tell you what, man, wargames was a real niche market. When I started to hear sales numbers at MicroProse of above 50,000 I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, that's incredible'. But to answer your question, yes, it was very, very exciting. Everybody there was smarter than me, and I just felt that I could learn so much. And everybody was really excited about it because everybody, I think, could tell that it was going to be huge. At the time it was very small, but I think we could all tell. There was a company on the West Coast called Electronic Arts, which had started about the same time as MicroProse and we were really competing with them. At the time they were doing their own in-house development as we were, and so I think that they were our real competition – but you know what happened from there. It was very exciting though, I think at one time Sid decided to change the name of the R&D department there to MPS Labs – MicroProse Software Labs – and that was a real morale boost, because we all felt a part of something kind of new and different, we weren't just a games company – we were a lab. We were into research, it was cool. It was awesome, I have to say.

Were you aware of the kind of limitations of the hardware at the time, or was that just kind of part of the Wild West nature of it?

Well it took me a long time to view it that way, and I'll tell you why. You know, I came from West End Games where we did some really good graphics – the map work, the charts and tables and all that stuff – you know, really high definition graphics. And, you know, I got to MicroProse and right after I accepted the job they sent me some of their most recent work and told me to play them and get familiar with it. And it was a real shock because the frame rate was less than one per second, there were only four colours and those colours were the worst four colours that you could possibly pick. At first I was very much aware of the limitations and I wondered how we could make it into something that lots and lots of people would want to play rather than the 50,000 people that were buying our games at the time. But I had to learn about sprites – there were so many limitations on how big sprites could be, and what colour they could be and how many colours we could use. And then when you get into the sound area of games – which I was really interested in – you know, there was just the IBM speaker and it could only make one sound at a time, it couldn't do multiple sounds. It was awful.

At what point did you get to properly tackle audio for a game?

Well the first game that I wrote all the music for was *Sword Of The Samurai*, which was designed by Lawrence Schtick who got to MicroProse maybe a few months before I did. He designed that and even though we only had that one monophonic speaker, I wrote some tunes that I think made a really big impression on Bill Stealey, who was one of the owners of MicroProse. They took that game to CES and I guess they cranked up the speakers on the music and it got a lot of attention. I think it was like the first time that a "real" composer had written anything for games, and so it got a lot of attention. And so after that they started asking me to not only do the design and production for a game, but also write the music too. So I got pretty overloaded for a while there.

THAT WAS JUST THE WAY IT WAS BACK THEN, EVERYBODY WAS CONTRIBUTING ALL THE TIME TO JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING

And what did you move onto after *Sword Of The Samurai*?

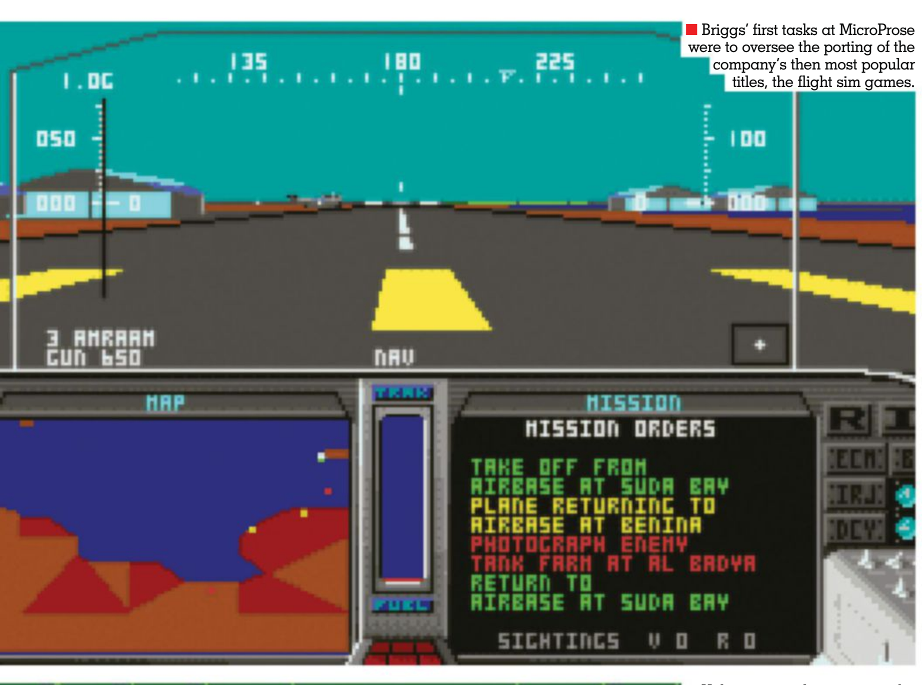
The first game that I designed that was my own design was *Knights Of The Sky*. I did write the music for that, but that was my own design and I worked with Scott Spangler, a really great programmer, to make that happen. Oh God, there's just so many. *Covert Action* was one of them – I wrote the music for that, and I wrote some of the text. At a certain point they asked me if I just wanted to just be the composer, and I said yes, so I joined the sound department. And there were probably 15-20 games that came through the sound department while I was over there.

And you helped design the first *Civilization* game?

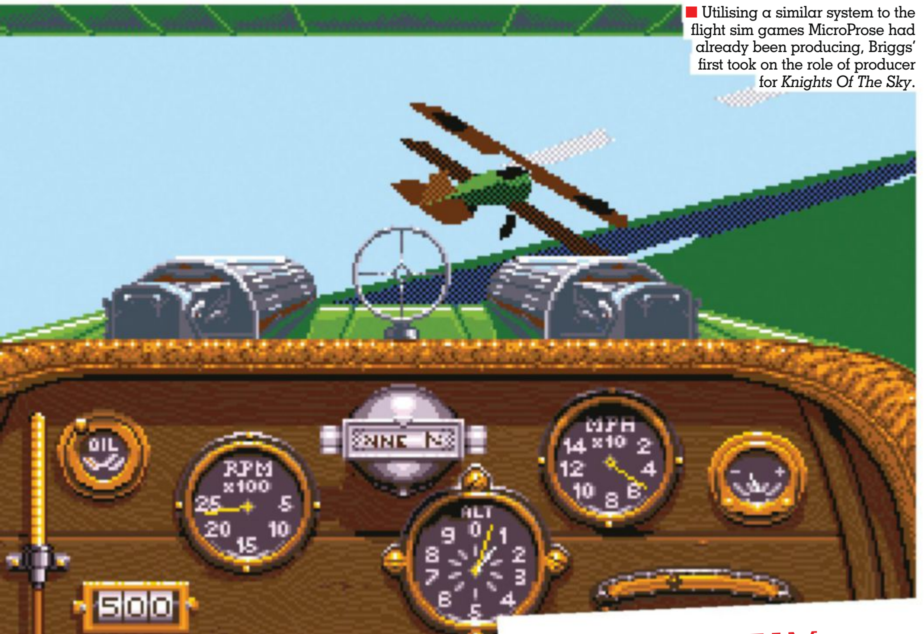
Yeah, so the way Sid worked in those days was that he was happy to have all these game designers around the place because I think he viewed us as a resource. So, like, he came to me one day and said, 'Hey, I'm working on this world history game,' and of course that got my attention because that was the kind of board game stuff that I liked, and he said, 'Could you give me a list of all the things you'd expect to see in a game like this,' and so each of us put together a list – I think there were four designers that put together a list of things that we thought should be in there – and then about a week later he came around with a prototype and it would have all that stuff in there, and the question was how can we implement these things better? From a design standpoint it was really a group effort; the whole design group was involved with that. Sid did all the programming and he ultimately made the decision about what would stay in and how things were going to work. That was just the way it was back then, everybody was contributing all the time to just about everything. It was very collaborative.

MicroProse went through a phase where it was trying to branch out, but it wasn't so successful at the time. What was the atmosphere of the company like at that time?

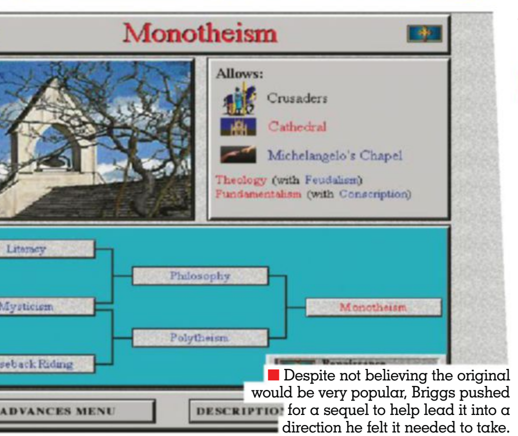
There was a moment in time where Bill Stealey had the idea that MicroProse should go into coin-operated games and suddenly that became the focus of the whole company, except for my little group and Sid. Most of the company took to that and that was a big failure. It just drained the company of a lot of its resources; all of the profits the strategy group and the flight sims were making were being plugged back into the coin-op thing. I would say that this was the point when the company started going way down. MicroProse was financially strapped and it sold itself to Spectrum Holobyte. And we all thought that was strange because Spectrum Holobyte had no games, they didn't really have any product and yet it wanted to change the company's name from MicroProse to Spectrum Holobyte. And so there was a sort of sense of resentment by most of the development staff. That was really what led me to start thinking about doing my own thing, and at the time I had just taken over the director of product development job. I could see how things worked, in terms of the money and the royalties and all the financial side of things. So I started thinking, we have so much talent here, if we could just get out from under this huge burden of coin-ops we could do well.



■ Briggs' first tasks at MicroProse were to oversee the porting of the company's then most popular titles, the flight sim games.



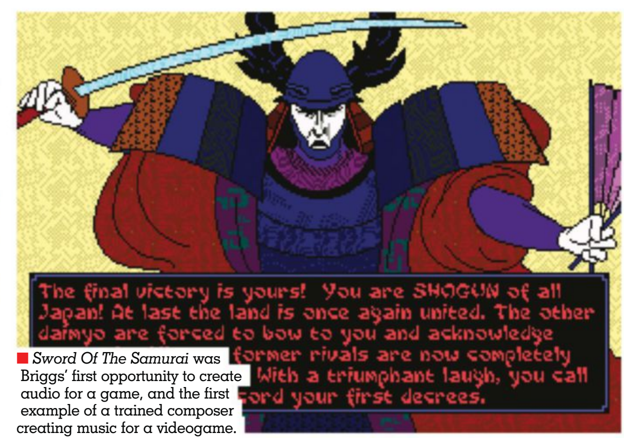
■ Utilising a similar system to the flight sim games MicroProse had already been producing, Briggs' first took on the role of producer for *Knights Of The Sky*.



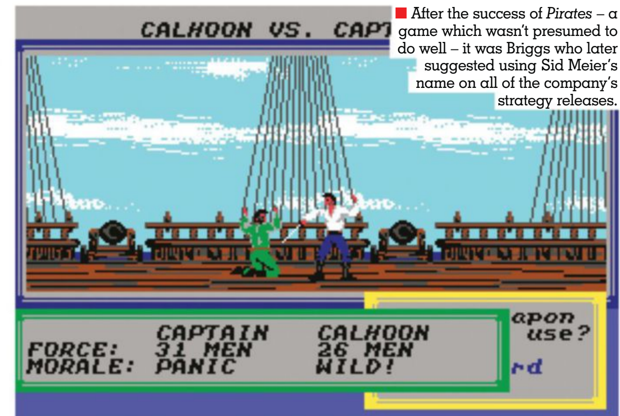
■ Despite not believing the original would be very popular, Briggs pushed for a sequel to help lead it into a direction he felt it needed to take.

BUILDING A TEAM

"■■■ MicroProse started to bring in people who had been designing board games; there was me, Bruce Shelley, and there was Sandy Peterson. We all started at about the same time, and we all came from plenty of different backgrounds. Bruce had come from Avalon Hill, Sandy Peterson had come from more of a role-playing background and I was strictly hardcore wargames; that was my passion. So we were bringing knowledge to the company that nobody else had. Sid was a game designer, but he was really a programmer and he just happened to be really good at game design."

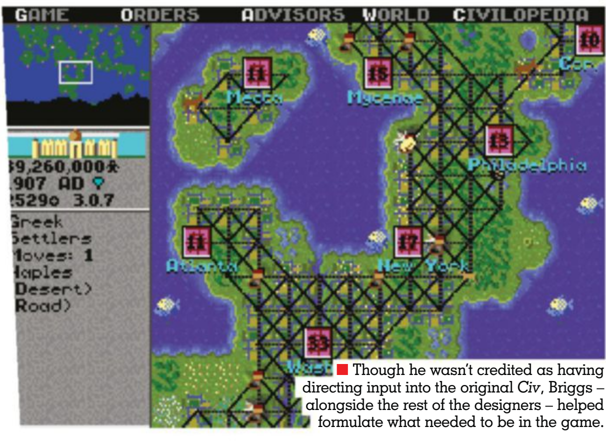


■ *Sword Of The Samurai* was Briggs' first opportunity to create audio for a game, and the first example of a trained composer creating music for a videogame.



■ After the success of *Pirates* – a game which wasn't presumed to do well – it was Briggs who later suggested using Sid Meier's name on all of the company's strategy releases.





■ Though he wasn't credited as having directing input into the original *Civ*, Briggs – alongside the rest of the designers – helped formulate what needed to be in the game.

Steve Jobs was originally hired to create a prototype of Breakout for just $750 with an additional bonus for keeping the board down below 50 TTL chips, keeping costs down as a result

GAME CHANGERS

BREAKOUT

Released: April 1976 **Publisher:** Atari, Inc **Developer:** Atari, Inc **System:** Arcade

After more than 40 years, Atari's arcade and console hit remains fun to play and a massive influence on modern gaming, not least because of the people who helped to make it

THE STORY OF *Breakout* is one that involves some of the biggest and most influential names in early home tech innovations – people who would continue to make extraordinary contributions to the explosion in arcade gaming, home consoles and home computing. And if the linchpins of the evolution of the videogame market were *Pong* and *Space Invaders*, then *Breakout* was the axel that ran between them.

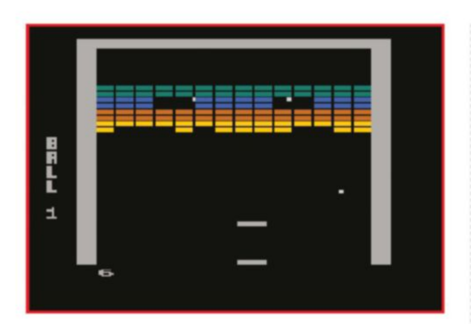
Released by Atari, Inc in arcades in April 1976, *Breakout* was essentially a single-player variant of Atari's own *Pong* that had taken the world by storm four years earlier. It was originally the brainchild of Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell and legendary Atari engineer Steve Bristow as a response to the growing number of *Pong* imitators on the market and a desire to offer a *Pong*-like experience that solo players could enjoy. A simple enough concept, but one that would prove to be hugely engaging for decades.

What's more, the people who Atari would end up hiring to bring this concept to life were none other than Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, who would found Apple the same year as *Breakout*'s release. There are several interesting stories about how that played out, including how the financial bonuses were ultimately split between board-maker Jobs and coder Wozniak, but what we're really interested in is how their interpretation of the original Bristow and Bushnell concept would ultimately prove to be another massive success for Atari and push gaming further down the

IT WAS SEEING BREAKOUT IN COLOUR THAT CONVINCED WOZNIAK THAT A COLOUR DISPLAY ON HOME COMPUTERS WOULD BE A HUGELY POPULAR MOVE

THE OFFICIAL SEQUELS

BREAKOUT CONTINUED TO EVOLVE FOR YEARS TO COME



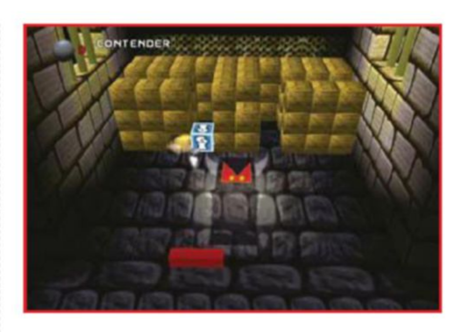
SUPER BREAKOUT (1978)

★ The game that would ultimately see *Breakout* extend its success from arcade cabinets to home consoles, *Super Breakout* upgraded the original game with new modes of play as well as a default colour display. It plays virtually identically to the original release.



BREAKOUT 2000 (1996)

★ Released for the Atari Jaguar, *Breakout 2000* turned to pre-rendered 3D graphics, tilting the playing field down so that it appeared to be bouncing the ball away from the player along a floor. Gameplay modifiers, both good and bad, get dropped into play too.



BREAKOUT (2000)

★ Similar in terms of gameplay presentation to *Breakout 2000*, this PC and PlayStation version of the game made more use of its 3D graphics, stacking bricks on top of each other. It also introduced a story about your paddle (named Bouncer) attempting to rescue his friends.

path to success. As we mentioned, the core concept was simple enough, swinging the *Pong* playing field from a horizontal to vertical position, moving your paddle from left to right in order to keep a single ball bouncing around, clearing layers of blocks from the top of the screen, with each layer of blocks representing a different and increasing points value, clearing the layers as well as amassing a high score.

It wasn't the first game to attempt to translate Pong into a single-player experience (that credit likely belongs to *Clean Sweep* release by Ramtek in 1974), but it was easily the most successful, thanks in part to how it used colour cellophane over a black-and-white monitor display in order to have the blocks at the top of the screen in different colours and help to delineate them for scoring. It was a neat trick and one that would prove to be hugely influential on Wozniak according to interviews in the years since.

Apparently it was seeing *Breakout* in colour that convinced him that a colour display on home computers would be a hugely popular move, which in turn helped push the massively successful Apple II in that direction when Wozniak designed it for release in 1977. Where would we be now if Apple hadn't launched its revolutionary home computer then?

Additionally, Tomohiro Nishikado has acknowledged that his *Space Invaders* was essentially a variation on *Breakout* with blocks replaced by alien shapes that moved and shot back. The paradigm of games where you occupied and must defend the bottom of the screen by sending projectiles to the top was established in large part by *Breakout*'s design.

Breakout would go on to spawn its own more obvious imitators, of course, and a number of important spin-offs. *Super Breakout* was probably the most notable thanks to its release on Atari 5200 and 2600 consoles and its introduction of additional game modes such as Double with an additional ball, Cavity where more balls can be freed from above the wall of blocks and Progressive where the blocks gradually move down the screen, which may sound familiar to you as a mechanic since some variation of this concept was also seen in *Space Invaders* and, to some extent, *Tetris*.

But perhaps what we like best about *Breakout* is that it still really works. And by that we mean that it's still an incredibly enjoyable game to play. In the over 40 years since Atari released this arcade game it has seen many incarnations and variations, but the core gameplay remains virtually untouched and even in its basic form it is a hugely enjoyable game to play. It's simple, of course, but there is elegance in that simplicity. Even something as small as having the ball bounce away at different angles depending on where on the paddle it makes contact adds a layer of strategy and skill that the core idea doesn't necessarily make apparent.

The gameplay remains as engaging now as it did in the 70s, still as challenging and still as easy to pick. It took the concept of standing on your own and throwing a ball against a wall and turned it into something far more rewarding, where there was an endgame to work towards and reasons to keep pushing yourself to play more.

As one of the success stories of the arcade and burgeoning console era, *Breakout*'s place in the pantheon of gaming has been well established. That it helped so many important developers, engineers and thinkers on their path only helps to elevate it to another, more lofty, level.

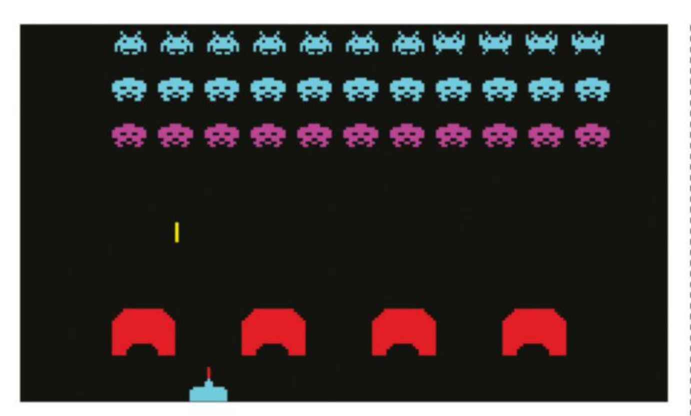
KEY FACTS

- Wozniak worked for four nights as well as during the day when he was supposed to be working at Hewlett Packard to design the board for the game *Breakout*.
- Atari couldn't actually manufacture Wozniak's compact 44-chip board, because it was too dense, so they released a 100-chip version instead.
- Steve Jobs received a bonus of $5,000 for delivering the game in four days on so few chips, but he apparently didn't tell Wozniak about that.

GAME CHANGERS

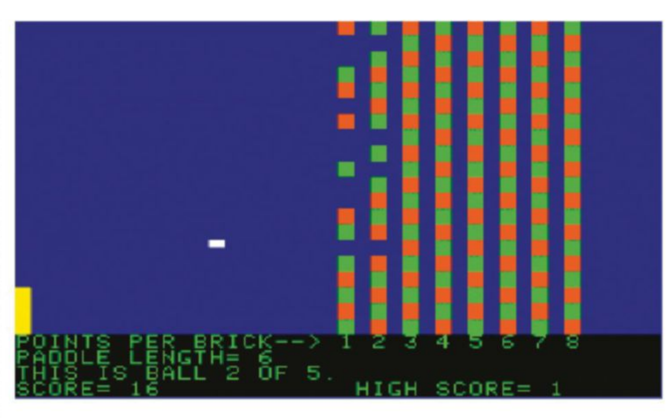
8 GAMES THAT OWE A DEBT TO BREAKOUT

THE ATARI CLASSIC HAS SOMEHOW MANAGED TO LIVE ON IN SPIRIT THROUGH A MASS OF OTHER TITLES, MAJOR HITS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT



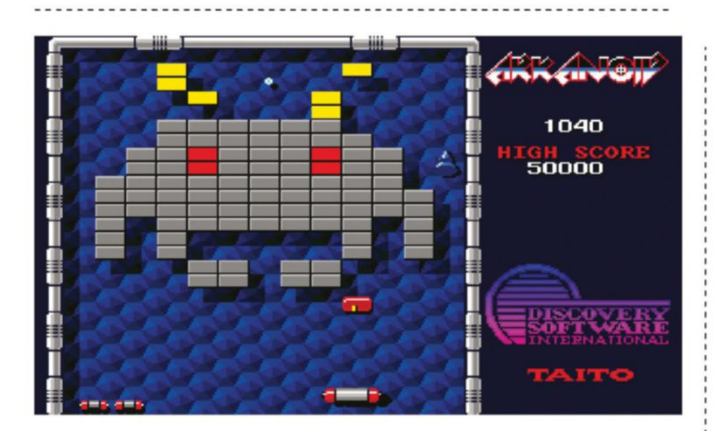
SPACE INVADERS (1978)

Game designer Tomohiro Nishikado has credited *Breakout* as a major influence on *Space Invaders* alongside *Star Wars* and *The War Of The Worlds*. The paddle was replaced by a laser cannon, the ball replaced by blasts from your laser and the blocks at the top of the screen replaced by aliens, who in turn fire back. It adds a lot of extra gameplay mechanics to the concept, but the base format of the game is very similar to Atari's arcade hit.



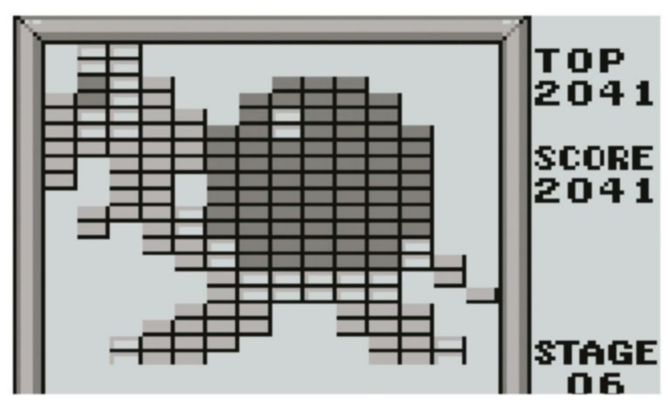
LITTLE BRICK OUT (1979)

In part as tribute to his involvement on the original Atari game, Steve Wozniak included this *Breakout* homage on the Apple II DOS 3.2 system disc. The playing field was rotated on its side, playing more similarly to the original inspiration for *Breakout* itself, *Pong*, but the gameplay of bouncing a 'ball' against rows of blocks, each with increasing numerical value, remained consistent. It was a very simple game, but it was kind of an Easter egg anyway.



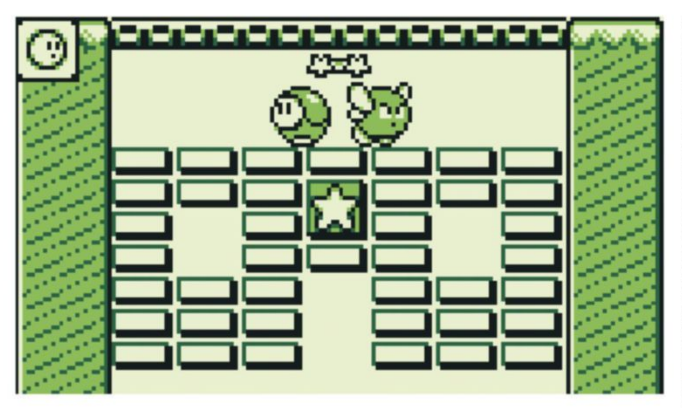
ARKANOID (1986)

Reviving the *Breakout* concept ten years after its original release, *Arkanoid* introduced power-ups, a variety of stage designs, different brick types, enemy ships and a final boss battle once all of the levels have been cleared. *Arkanoid* really feels like an amalgamation of so many ideas from late 70s game design all wrapped into one quite addictive and engaging package, but *Breakout* is really at the heart of them all.



ALLEYWAY (1989)

This launch title for the Game Boy can probably be most directly compared to *Arkanoid* since you control a spaceship as your paddle (possibly piloted by Mario if the game's boxart is to be believed), but once again the core gameplay is clearly based on *Breakout*. Some limitations in how the ball would bounce and a general lack of flair (such as any power-ups at all) made this release a bit of a flop critically, although it sold okay.



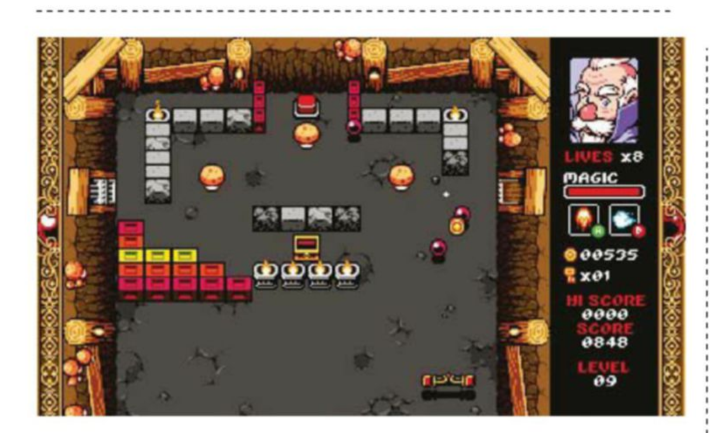
KIRBY'S BLOCK BALL (1995)

Nintendo took another stab at the *Breakout* formula on Game Boy with this *Kirby* spin-off, which appeared to address many of the issues reviewers had with *Alleyway*. Multiple paddles were now in play at the sides and bottom of the screen, adding additional challenge and control for the player. Power-ups also made an appearance and everything was given some *Kirby* flair to tie it into the franchise aesthetic.



PEGGLE (2007)

Pachinko is clearly the most relevant touchstone for *Peggle*, but much of the gameplay structure can actually be traced back to *Breakout*. Clearing all the blocks on screen to move on to the next stage and keeping the ball in play by bouncing it off a paddle at the bottom of the screen (albeit you don't have control over that paddle in *Peggle*) feel like direct pulls from the 70s arcade game to us. This game brought the concepts to a new generation.



WIZORB (2011)

One of our favourite interpretations of the form, *Wizorb* merges classic paddle and ball gameplay with some RPG progression mechanics as you defeat stage after stage, hitting enemies and gaining gems to spend on new abilities and lives for your quest. The ultimate aim is to restore a town to its former glory, defeating its tormentors along the way. In practice you control your wand and you bounce a ball around hitting monsters and finding hidden treasures.



GOOGLE IMAGE BREAKOUT (2013)

To mark 37 years since the release of the original game, Google implemented a tribute to the game with a little Easter egg on its image search field. Simply type in 'Atari Breakout' in Google Image search and the field of thumbnails will morph into coloured blocks, adding a paddle at the bottom of your browser window that you can control with your mouse. A game of *Breakout* begins to play out for you as you hit the image blocks and make them disappear. Simple and effective.

THE VAULT



Thanks to its slim, bezel-less casing, the screens appear larger on this device than on the New 3DS XL, but they are actually the same size.

The 2DS camera and microphone, positioned at the top and bottom of the New 3DS XL last time out, are now neatly featured in the hinge of the device.

As ever, the 2DS XL has full NFC functionality so that you can scan your amiibo collection and enjoy their benefits in-game.

NEW NINTENDO 2DS XL

MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO** PRICE: **£129.99**

GIVEN THE SUCCESS OF NINTENDO'S SWITCH, THERE'S AN ARGUMENT TO BE MADE THAT THE 3DS – AND ITS FAMILY OF DIFFERING HARDWARE CONFIGURATIONS – HAS BEEN MADE OBSOLETE. The problem with that argument is that it fails to realise a simple truth: it's software that makes a console, not a list of improved specifications, gimmicks, or a release date. The 3DS features one of (if not *the*) most spectacular back-catalogues of handheld games available on the market and, now, thanks to the revised 2DS XL, there's a spectacular console to play them on, too.

Inexpensive when compared with the Switch, lighter than the 3DS consoles, and more attractive than its 2DS counterparts – this is a console designed for no-nonsense gaming. A smooth clamshell design ensures it's protected from all but the most tragic of crashes, the addition of C Stick and ZL/ZR Buttons (along with Amiibo support) expands its support, while the 4.88-inch screen guarantees clarity and clear viewing angles.

The New 2DSXL is a truly wonderful console; it's perfect for the commute, travelling and holidays. It is inexpensive and incredibly easy to use, featuring a genuinely fantastic library of games covering just about every genre imaginable. It can't compete with the Switch, of course, but it isn't supposed to; this is a handheld console for the person who isn't interested in owning a premium product, but simply wants to enjoy some of the best experiences that gaming has to offer.

www.nintendo.co.uk

VERDICT 9/10

GAMING CLOTHING



BLACK MESA RESEARCH FACILITY - T-SHIRT

Listen here, *Half-Life 3* is clearly never happening, but continue to tempt fate by taking this Black Mesa tee out into the world. Just an FYI, access to secret research facilities not guaranteed.
gamerprint.co.uk



MASS EFFECT PATHFINDER T-SHIRT

Forge a better path through your world than BioWare could, picking up this shirt to become a honorary pathfinder. Warning: talking to people while wearing could make their faces tired.
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Pledge your allegiance to the UNSC's Spirit Of Fire and wear your love of *Halo Wars* on your sleeve with this tee that shows your love of Halo is stronger than anybody else's.
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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA CLUE

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **$39.99**

A new take on an old classic, *The Legend Of Zelda Clue* puts the traditional mystery solving to one side as you work with up to five other players to deduce who has the power to defeat Ganondorf, find his hidden lair, and what weapon you'll need to pull it off. This collector's edition variant of *Clue* is a really wonderful new take on the original game, and the perfect gift for anybody looking to continue their adventures through Hyrule long after *Breath Of The Wild* draws to an end.
thinkgeek.com



Finding the hero among you rather than the murderer makes this a rather more wholesome game.

Find the magical item that will win the day and the location of the battle in order to triumph.



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Chuck your copy of *Super Mario Maker* in the bin and create your very own Super Mario scenario in real life. With eight different sets to choose from, covering famous characters like Mario, Bowser, and Yoshi, and iconic props such as the mushroom and gold coins, these lovely and well-made Figuarts sets are a must buy for any fans of the Mushroom Kingdom.
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The ultimate bedside light for any and all of you *Minecraft* fans out there. This lamp, conveniently shaped like a *Minecraft* potion bottle, is an officially licensed product designed to bring a little light to your life. Bringing the magic of *Minecraft* magic brewing to life, you can transition between indigo, light blue, cyan, green, peach, yellow, red, and white colours, letting you rep your magic of choice with ease.
ThinkGeek.com



POP OVERWATCH POSH TRACER FIGURE

While *Overwatch* is made up by a multitude of playable heroes – that's one of the reasons it's so fun, after all – Tracer is undoubtedly the closest the game has to cover star. POP is beginning to play the lootbox game with us now, unleashing our favourite *Overwatch* heroes out into the wild in the ridiculously cutesy Funko Pop style, now with limited edition costumes!
thinkgeek.com



BREAKIN' THE BORDERS

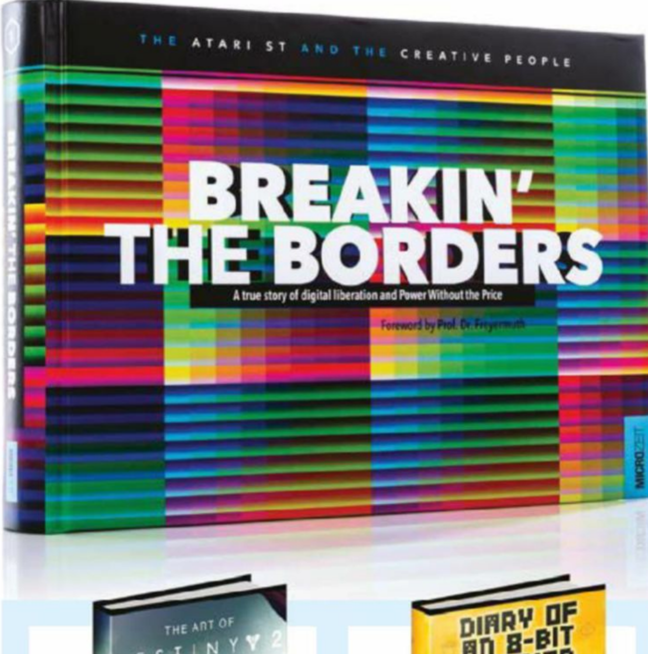
PUBLISHER: **MICROZEIT**

TAKING A CLOSER look at the Atari ST demoscene, *Breakin' The Borders* is a fascinating look at one of the most creative corners of game design from the early Eighties working its way up into the early Nineties. It's a book that focuses in on the small groups and individuals who sort to unleash their creativity through the Atari ST, literally breaking the borders of the screen space that was supposed to be available to them so that they could produce full-screen experiences unlike anything else.

Translated from the original German by Richard Karsmakers, Marco B. Breddin's look at the Atari ST and the underground scene that it helped to foster is intended to run for three volumes, this being the first in the series and at nearly 400 pages, it's already looking like an impressive project. Every page is packed with detail from the Atari ST era, whether that's interviews with people who were in the scene in its heyday, full-page screens of the biggest games (which look excellent on this landscape orientated book) or photos and advertising imagery from the period, helping to set the stage for what was happening around these creatives at the time.

Every game and team has been given their own approach as the layouts and images in the book keep adapting to complement the subject matter. What we mean by this is that it's not a heavily templated or repeated book. Every page feels thought over and dissected, which is good to see. There's even a bunch of code in their showing how the teams managed to break out of the Atari ST's default borders to display images in full-screen. As a document of some early games industry knowledge, this is a fine compendium.

www.microzeit.com



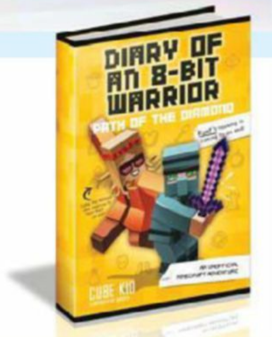
VERDICT 8/10



THE ART OF DESTINY 2

With Bungie so focused on bringing more personality to *Destiny 2*, this art book is set to chronicle the major aesthetical changes, the all-new worlds and locations, not to mention all of that tasty loot. See it here, fall in love with it, hunt for it in-game.

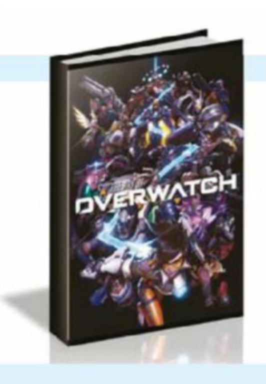
forbiddenplanet.com



DIARY OF AN 8-BIT WARRIOR

The 8-bit adventure continues in the unofficial *Minecraft* adventure book, with our hero joining the Minecraftia school in an effort to follow in the footsteps of Steve. Only the best students can begin the training and, given the alternatives are farming and mining, the race is on.

forbiddenplanet.com



THE ART OF OVERWATCH

Explore the creative process behind *Overwatch* in this gorgeous oversized hardback book, showing never-before-seen concept artwork and commentary from Blizzard. *Overwatch* said so much with so little, and that's all down to the mastery of its art design.

Forbiddenplanet.com



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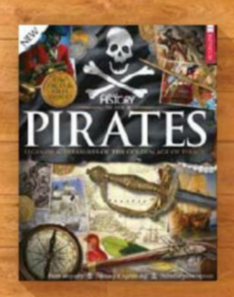
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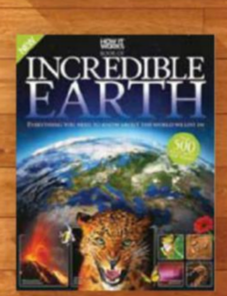










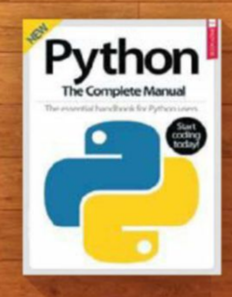


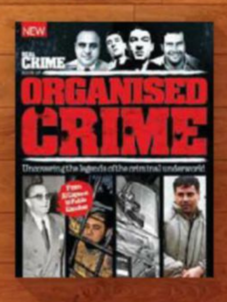


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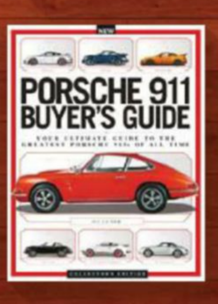














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